BOSS OF THE LONGHORN by Stephen Payne

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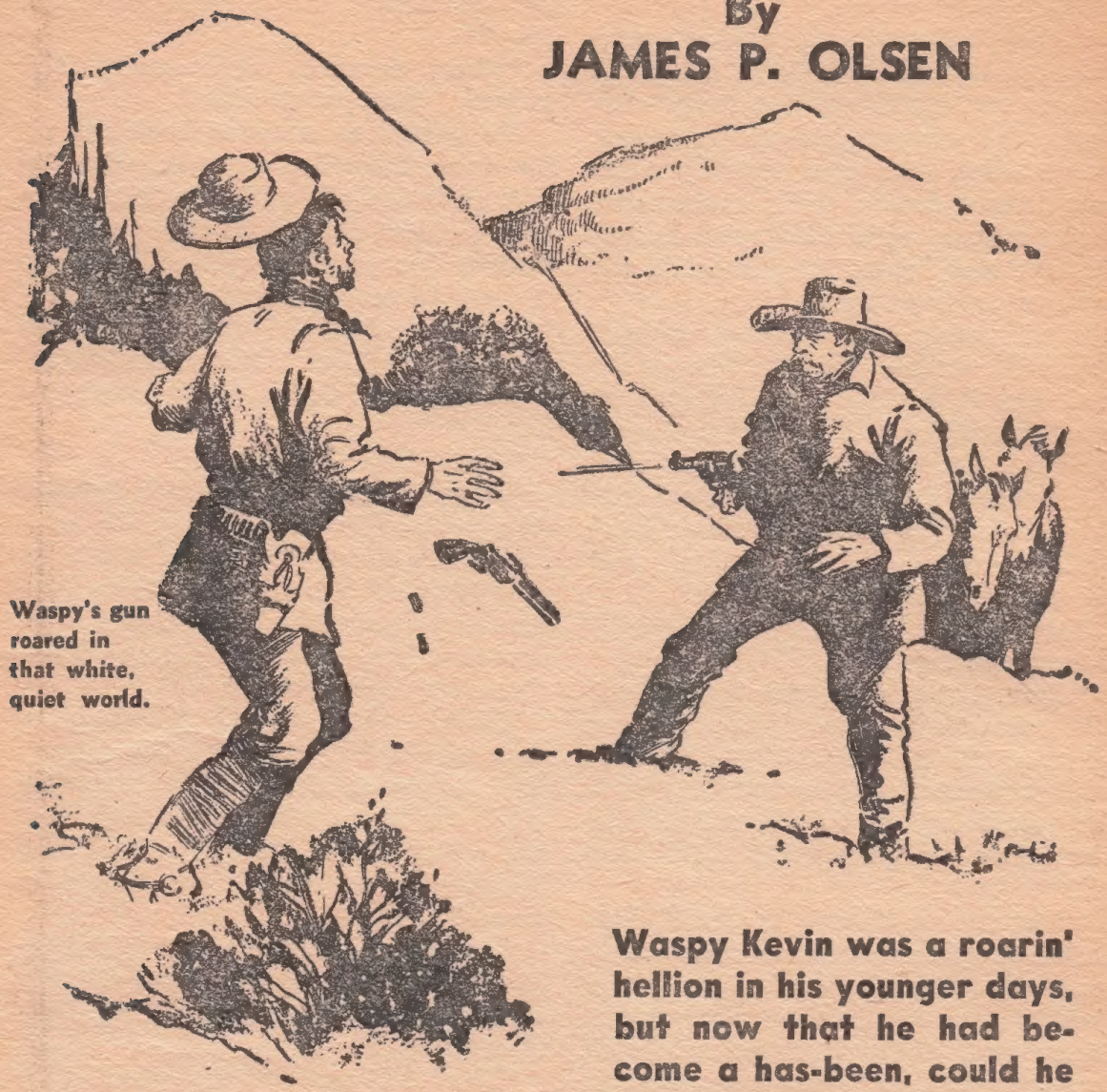
SIX-GUN PIE

By
JAMES P. OLSEN



Waspy's gun roared in that white, quiet world.

Waspy Kevin was a roarin' hellion in his younger days, but now that he had become a has-been, could he prove again that he was still made of whang-leather and steel?

WASPY KEVIN was once young and wild and full of hell. He'd dance, drink, gamble, shoot, snap brawnks, work cattle with any booger that ever hit the range, and more than hold his own with the best of them.

Now his joints were stiff and he could only look longingly into the past.

Those were the days when Waspy Kevin and his side-kick, Red Devlin, had ridden the range from Canada to Old Mexico. But Red Devlin married and settled down and Waspy Kevin rode it alone.

These past five years, Waspy had worked on the Pitchfork spread, the ranch Red Devlin had built up, although Red had been dead for ten years—killed when a bucker fell on him.

Waspy worked for Bill Devlin, Red's kid. Made him feel like a kid

again whenever he looked at the boy who looked so much like his old sidekick.

It wasn't that Waspy was on a pension because he was Red's old pard. Waspy could still ride the range with any of the young bucks on the spread, but he didn't walk so steadily after he'd flanked down a calf; he was missing at supper more than once, having come in and flopped on his bunk, too tired to even sit up.

"You young ones eat too much," he'd make excuse. "Now, when me an' Red was down in Texas, we shot up a saloon. With the law on our tail, *we* didn't eat for four days that time."

It'd been gitting worse, these last few weeks. The old man was ga'nted, hollow-eyed and he rolled and groaned in his sleep.

Sam Castro, the foreman, finally went to young Bill.

"Yeah, I noticed it for a long time," Bill admitted. "But, migod, Sam, what in the hell can I do? Trouble is, he's determined to keep up with the tophands, and it's plumb killing him. And do you think he'd ease off?"

"You got the answer to that!" Sam growled. "I'd put him to ridin' drift fence, or haulin' salt, or just sorta chasin' around lookin' for strays where they ain't. But that wouldn't fool him, Bill—an' you know it. It'd plumb bust his heart."

Bill muttered a couple of cuss words, got a bottle out of the drawer of the old desk his dad had used and he and Sam had a snort.

"I'd make him a *segundo* under you, and I've thought of it; or roundup boss. But he'd see through that too, and he knows you handle the roundup as well as the home ranch," Bill muttered. "It ain't as if he was on some little, slow spread. Way times are, we got to work fast and short-handed."

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "If he was where he could take his own sweet time, why, he'd last, maybe, until Ol' Nick run him down an' whacked him in the head with a brandin' iron. If—"

"Wait, dammit, can't you?" Bill griped. "You got an idea."

He pawed an account book out of his desk, flipped the leaves, wheeled around in his chair to face Sam. "Tobacco, a few clothes, is about all he's bought for near five years. He's got around fifteen hundred dollars coming to him. And if I tell him it's two thousand, he won't know the difference. Money don't mean much to him."

"Yeah, but—"

"Bigod, Sam, I sometimes wonder why you're foreman. Keep still a minute. Stick the neck of this bottle in your goozle," Bill snapped. "That two sections along Rain Crick, down on Storm Flats. We ain't run cattle there for three years."

"Naw," disgustedly. "You know she's too much trouble, what with a half dozen settlers cuttin' that off from our home range. Besides, she's ten miles down there. Reckon Red bought 'er so he'd have water in case—"

"You damned, dumb ox!" Bill fairly yelled. "Don't you savvy?" He sighed. Asked, "Are you plumb dead asleep?"

"Must be, workin' for you," Sam insulted. "But I get 'er. Put a few head down there an' let Waspy run 'em. We'll have to run that Gus Nero's stuff off. He's been usin' them two sections as well as his own."

"Waspy can 'tend to that, and I ain't figuring your way. I'm going to see that Waspy gets his own brand, his own herd. Go find him and send him to me."

OLD Waspy, squinting, stooped, came in just a bit apprehensively. Maybe he'd done something wrong? Bill's face was so doggone severe. He indicated a chair, poured

Waspy a drink and remarked, "You'll need it before I'm done."

Waspy blinked. "I ain't—"

"That's just it!" Bill rapped. "You ain't got the brains of a tick. Look at you, sitting there, the best doggone cowboy ever was born, just like that old song. A tophand, with more ready cash than I got myself. Why don't you run your own spread?"

Waspy looked wistful. "I allus sorta figgered I would, some day like to own my own iron. But—"

"But—hell, you jackass. Some of these days, you're going to be old. Won't be able to ride and work cows better than everybody else. Then what?"

It was damned pitiful, Bill told Sam Castro later, to see how Waspy swelled up straightened his shoulders and threw out his chest when Bill said, "Some of these days you're going to be old."

"I don't know," Waspy hedged. "I ain't got the money, an' I figger you need me right here."

"Sure, I need you. But I need your money lots more. Don't you know you got two thousand dollars in my safe?"

He hadn't, of course. The money he did have was just on the books. But books and such things weren't in Waspy's corral.

Waspy's eyes blinked. "Two thousand! Aw, but I don't need 'er, Bill. Use 'er an'—"

"Whether you like it or not, you're starting a brand. I don't want that money, and I want somebody down on Storm Flats who'll let us use that crick if we ever go dry up here. I'm selling you Storm Flats for a dollar an acre. I'll take a note against it for a start of cattle for you. You'll have cash to build a house, get what you need. You can buy grub supplies from me because I buy things cheaper in big lots.

"Dawwww-gone it, Waspy. For the sake of what you was to my dad, won't you do this for me?"

"That land's worth a heap more," Waspy mumbled. He was choking though, his old chin quivering. Bill had to cough and turn away and hunt for nothing in particular in his desk.

SO Waspy Kevin moved to Storm Flats.

There was the day when fifty head of cattle were driven into the branding corral at the Pitchfork. Short yearlings, young cows, a young bull that was the lord of the herd and the ham of Waspy's eggs. And there was Waspy, strutting like a bantam gamecock, dragging the iron out of the fire and slapping his own—his *own!*—registered brand on the first yearling, and venting the Pitchfork iron.

He'd chosen for his brand the Three Links because, he explained to Bill, "It's sorta like Red an' me an' you was all sorta chained up together now."

When the "drive" started, Waspy "rodded" the bunch that went along. Bill, Sam Castro, four hands. The cook came along with the chuck wagon, too, and they had a meal on the way. The chuck wagon carried lumber and building materials, but it was that camp on the "drive" that pleased Waspy most.

While they were yet a few miles from his place on Storm Flats, Waspy and Bill rode on ahead. Storm Flats lay below the rolling country in which the Pitchfork was located. An expanse of fair grazing land, cut by washes, dotted here and there by clumps of alder and chokecherry, with willows along Rain Creek.

When the severe storms of winter came right off the Pole, it wasn't hard to figure how the flats got the name.

The pair rode across Waspy's land, and Waspy became more waspy as they progressed. The cattle wearing the GNG brand of Gus Nero and his partner, Tate Gar, were grazing everywhere.

"They got more of their damn bone bags on my spread than on their own!" Waspy swore, putting the hooks to his horse. They followed him around a bend in the creek three miles away, crossed and pulled up at the shack that was the home of Nero and Gar.

Waspy had met this pair in the town of Gunsight a couple of times, and he never had liked their looks. Why, even the hoemen above them, the lowest sort of nesters, wouldn't have truck with this sullen pair.

"Hi-up, you in there!" Waspy bawled. Bill Devlin hid a grin.

The door opened. Gus Nero, a big, dark, arrogant cuss with puffy eyes screwed into a sneering face, came crow-hopping out. His partner, Tate Gar, followed him. Gar was thin, with a head that seemed twice as long as it was wide, and a thin, weak, fishy mouth. A look-over-the-shoulder type.

"What the hell you want?" Nero snarled. "Hollerin' up a man—"

He saw Bill Devlin sitting a-horse on the other side of Waspy. His tone altered. He hated the kind of power Bill represented, yet he wanted no trouble with an outfit as big as his. "Howza, Devlin," he grunted. "You want to see me?"

"No. This *rancher* here does, though."

"Rancher?" Nero frowned.

"Owner of the Three Links," Waspy snapped. "I'm movin' in on them sections up the crick. My herd'll be along today. We'll cut your stuff back on your own side of the line. You keep it there. Don't mind tellin' you, you've tooken advantage, usin' there so much."

"The hell!" Nero grunted. He looked at Bill. "You said you never cared—that is—well, you never sent word when we grazed over there."

Bill shrugged. "That range belongs to Waspy. I got nothing to do with it."

"Bigod!" Tate Gar spoke in a whining voice. "We ain't got range for all our beef, and its handier to water on that piece."

"Had your word," Waspy grunted. "You be on hand to help push your damn beef back!"

"That's telling them," Bill applauded as they rode away. Bill Devlin dismissed Nero and Gar lightly, and aside from not liking them, Waspy did too. Mistakes will happen. . .

NERO and Gar saw Waspy's fifty head put on his range, after the Pitchfork boys had pushed the GNG steers back across the line. Nero rode up to Waspy who was pointing out the site for his cabin, stable and corral. A site beside the creek.

"You don't need near all this range for what you got, so me an' Gar'll just put part of ours back," he informed Waspy.

If he had been a decent man, speaking in a decent manner, Waspy might have agreed. But Nero was *telling* him what he aimed to do!

"Bigod!" Waspy roared, "git to hell off my range. Git, an' stay, an' keep your damn hides across the line!"

Nero swelled, flushed. He started to speak, thought better of it with the Pitchfork crew present, wheeled his horse. He and Gar were mumbling together as they rode away.

By dark—it came early with the deepening of autumn toward winter—the Pitchfork boys had a corral built and foundation for a one-room shanty laid. They broke out a couple bottles around the campfire that night and did 'er up big.

By the next afternoon, the cabin was finished. Waspy rode back with the bunch that evening—reluctant to leave his place—stayed all night and the next morning, drove back in a low-bed wagon with a few bits of furniture, cooking stuff and things like that in it. He led three saddle horses behind.

Waspy Kevin—rancher. Bigod, that

sure was plumb fine. But his pride, fierce, high, still rising, his happiness was forgotten when he reached his place. GNG beef cluttered up his range. That beef wouldn't have drifted the two and more miles from the GNG line in this short spell.

Waspy set his place to rights, covered the wagon with a tarp, climbed his horse and started those dogies back. He hazed about two dozen head of them across the GNG line at a fine, dead run, chased them on a quarter mile, went by them and pulled up at the shack Nero and Gar used. They were outside when he pulled up.

"What the hell's the idea runnin' our beef like that?" Nero bawled. "You damn ol' gran'paw, you figger your age'll stop us—"

Waspy rose to this. "Ol'? I can make better men than you two varmints! You drove them bone sacks on my range. Don't do 'er again. You here me shout?"

"An' if we do?" Nero sneered.

"Try 'er, an' see."

He wheeled his horse and lit a shuck.

DURING the next two weeks, he drove a few natural GNG strays back across, which same was all right with him, and he religiously kept his own stuff from going to the other side.

GNG stock was ga'nted; the true section Nero and Gar owned was overgrazed. That was their own damn foolishness.

The first snow fell, went off; in the mornings, ice rimmed the creek. Waspy had hauled down some hay from the Pitchfork and was all set for the winter's blasts. This morning he rode his range, and as usual, counted every single head he owned. There was a lift to his stride now, a way of renewed youth that hadn't been evident when he'd kept pace with younger men.

There was an age-old anger in him though, when he combed his range from end-to-end and found two yearlings gone.

He rode onto GNG, ran the length of it. No sign of his missing stock. He headed directly for Nero and Gar. That pair left off patching their rickety corral.

"I'm missin' two head yearlin's," Waspy informed them.

"We ain't got your damn beef in our pocket," Gar shrilled.

Waspy looked at the light wagon, the wheels bolstered by baling wire, that stood nearby.

"See you brought that wagon in from direction of town," he intoned. "Reckon I'll take a trip to town myse'f."

"Look here," Nero blurted. "Why don't you be neighbors. You let us use part of your range, maybe we can help you keep your beef from—uh—strayin' off."

"Maybe," Waspy said in a flat, harsh tone, "I'll shove a gunbarrel down your throat."

"Bigod, you try!" Nero raged. "Wish you would. An' another thing, you ol' bygones: before you're done, you'll be damn glad to let us over there. Yeah, maybe to give up altogether. Now git!"

Waspy got. He headed straight for town.

"Maybe," Gar proposed, "we better foller him and see what he does." Nero grunted assent and they hit the trail themselves.

They were right on his tail when he reached Gunsight. He went straight to the butcher shop.

"Two yearlings from Nero and Gar? Sure," the butcher revealed. "I own a market down to Harmony, too. Sent them beeves down there."

Waspy turned, stalked out. He met Nero and Gar before the Cowhand Saloon and Billiard Parlor.

"I found them yearlin's," he spat. "An' I'm tellin' you both, you'll eat gun pie if I miss ary another'n."

"You threatenin' me?" Nero barked. "You ol'—" His fist swung. Waspy tottered, fell. He rolled over, got to his hands and knees and staggered weakly to his feet. It was in him to go hopelessly after Nero with his fists, when the saloon doors banged open. Deputy Sheriff Luke Riley, gray-haired old-timer who'd been sheriff down at Harmony for many years, stepped between the pair.

"What the hell?" he snarled, shoving Nero back.

"He's accusin' me of rustlin' his beef," Nero snarled. "No—"

"Shut up!" Riley ordered curtly. He looked at Waspy. He knew Waspy. He knew the type. He was of that school himself.

"What's it about, Waspy?" he wanted to know.

"Nothin', Riley," Waspy muttered. "Nothin' I can't fix up for myse'f. I missed two yearlin's. This pair sold two yearlin's to the butcher this mornin'."

"He's got no proof—" Nero began.

Riley's mouth was a grim line. "No, they's never much proof to that. Got to catch a butcher at his work. I'd be damn careful, though. Somebody might be watchin' you like I have, when you come to town. You've got the hangman's mark on your necks."

Nero sneered. Gar hunched and seemed to shiver.

"I'm goin' to get proof," Waspy avowed. "An' when I do—" He turned and started away. Stopped then, and gave back over one shoulder: "I'm diggin' out my ol' shootin' iron an' totin' her. That's all I got to say."

"Riley, that gives me right to go ironed myself," Nero yammered. "You heard him—"

"Deputy Riley when you speak," Riley grunted. "I never heard a word."

SNOWS came. It grew colder. For many days Waspy had no sign of Gar or Nero; had no trouble with them. The blow, the loss of his yearlings rankled. He rode in bitter cold, tending his herd, forking hay, cutting holes in the thickening ice of Rain Creek—and waited.

Bill Devlin heard of the trouble. He rode down one day. It was the day Waspy found his dearest possession, his bull, limping badly. He was driving the animal into the corral when Bill pulled up.

"Sprain?" Bill asked.

"Ain't found, yet," Waspy muttered, looking over the bull.

"Heard you lost some stock and had a little trouble in town," Bill offered in an offhanded manner.

"Yeah. Little."

"By the way, Waspy, I got a hand too many. Could you use him this winter? Sort of, you know, help you out?"

"Thanks, Bill. Reckon I see through a open door. Figger a man ain't much of a cowman, can't cut his own dewlaps."

Bill gave it up. He couldn't come out and tell Waspy that he, Bill, figured Waspy too damned old to go around making gun-talk like he had. His thoughts were interrupted by a curse so low, so thoroughly from the heart, so damning that it gave Bill a sort of chill. He remembered then, of his father telling of Waspy's temper when he was aroused. Cold, deliberate, meaning. And also of Waspy's old expertness with a gun. But that—that was long ago.

Waspy didn't rage. That one phrase of cursing, and he was done. He pulled a stock knife from his pocket, made a quick slash, and climbed atop the corral before the bull could turn on him in pain. Surprised pain because Waspy had made a sort of pet of him.

Bill looked. Waspy held a bullet in the palm of his trembling hand. He was white, and with a light in his eyes the like of which Bill Devlin had never seen.

"Th-they're aimin' to get me to come a-foggin' over there," Waspy managed to say. "I ain't got me no rifle, Bill. Reckon you could loan me one?"

"Wait, now, Waspy. You got no proof they shot the bull," Bill quietly pointed out.

"Who else would've?" Waspy demanded flatly, in a manner that left no room for answer. "Nope. She's goin' to be this way: I'm ridin' my line plum frequent. If one shot comes across 'er, if anything else happens, I'll be fixed to fight 'er any way I want."

Bill Devlin knew there was no use arguing with him. He felt damned bad about it. Poor old Waspy had no chance against such odds as two men to one, age against youth. Bill secretly determined to manage to get one of his gun-handy punchers down here with Waspy—no matter how—at the first chance.

Waspy doctored the wound in the bull's foreshoulder. While Bill batched up a meal, he went out and drove his stock toward the far end of his range, three miles from the GNG shack. It was cold when he and Bill prepared to head for Pitchfork that afternoon. Waspy was driving his wagon team and Bill, on the seat beside him, had his horse tied to the tailgate.

"I'll get some salt, a few canned victuals, *an'* the rifle, an' head back come mornin'," Waspy told Bill. "Brrrr. Feel that wind. Feller knows why they call 'er Storm Flats when she hits like that, huh?"

"You bet. These flats stretch farther than a man'd believe," Bill agreed. "Wouldn't surprise me none, blizzard on the way."

"Uh-huh. I got to hustle back an' look after my stock."

Not another word about Nero or Gar. Waspy had the end of those boogers settled in his mind. Why speak of them?

PITCHFORK arose groaning the next morning. Punchers pulled on their heaviest hair chaps, buttoned into extra shirts, tied neckerchiefs over their ears, knotted them under their chins, and rode out in pairs. A gale was sweeping out of the north, and a fine, stinging spit of snow rode before it. Waspy loaded his supplies in his wagon, bundled up on the seat and let them go.

There was a real buster on the make. To Bill Devlin it meant that the GNG wouldn't be out to bother Waspy for a few days. Meantime, Bill hoped to rig his excuse to get a man down there with the old man.

Five miles from Pitchfork, as the hills began to break away, the storm had increased to a lashing fury of cold, searing hell. Waspy's eyelids were coated with the driven snow, and his team was white with it. He was half frozen when he hit Storm Flats, six miles above his place.

He could hardly see the heads of his horses now. The wind howled, drove the snow in slanting curtains that broke and swirled like untold billions of devils and white ghosts of the damned. Waspy had been in a lot of blizzards, but never one like this!

He held onto the seat with one mittened hand and let the horses have their way. He couldn't see the length of his wagon ahead, and he didn't see a single landmark by which to set his course. He knew it was nothing to be taken lightly. He'd known of men to get within a few yards of their destinations, only to circle away, to get lost and die in such blizzards as this.

The team snorted, halted. There was a mound in the snow, and that might mean anything. It seemed to Waspy it took him hours to climb down, go up and look.

A bent phantom in this rising storm, he stood there when he had scraped rapidly piling snow away. It was one of his own yearlings, and even in this furious cold the carcass was

not yet fully stiffened. The dogie had been partly skinned, too.

Waspy was too all in, too nearly frozen to even cuss. But the picture was in his mind: Nero and Gar, finding him gone, or seeing him leave; waiting, and when morning found him yet gone, coming up here where he'd driven his beef, slaughtering one, and then the blizzard running them away from the kill.

He made slow work climbing the wheel and regaining the seat, then let the team go on. He couldn't tell if the snow and wind-blinded horses went north, south, east or west. He just let them go. A mile—a slow, damnable mile of cold and aloneness in a howling world of white—and the team shied. Dulled, Waspy jerked his chin off his chest.

"F'gawd's sake, pick me up! That you, Kevin? Help me, man!"

Waspy stopped. Nearly frozen, exhausted, plastered with snow, Gus Nero staggered up. Waspy said nothing. Just waited until Nero had gained the seat, then started on. There was no breath for talking now.

Minutes, an hour, and another—"We're lost, bigod!" Waspy muttered into his snow and ice-matted whiskers. He stopped the team. He managed to nudge Nero to life. "Get off. We're lost. We got to Eskimo in, or we don't turn up when this blizzard breaks."

Nero tumbled off. Waspy was so numb that he stumbled and fell when he got down. Between them, they managed to get the wagon sheets and tarps out. They weighted them in the wagon bed with the blocks of salt, some of the supplies Waspy carried, and let the sheets of canvas hang to the ground and banked them with snow.

Waspy rolled a few canned goods and some crackers under the wagon, crawled under after Nero and made the hole secure with snow which he had scraped from under the wagon. He crawled back out then, loosed his team, returned.

Sitting there, leaning forward in the shelter under the wagon so their heads wouldn't bump, it seemed warm after the howling gale. Nero and Waspy, under the same wagon, in a world all their own, had to ride this out together.

And it was Waspy who'd saved Nero's life.

Waspy worked his hands inside his old mittens, flexed his arms, and felt life returning to his numbed members. He opened his old blanket-lined coat. Nero, nodding, jerked and looked into the barrel of Waspy's gun.

"Fork over your iron, feller," Waspy snarled.

"Migod," Nero groaned, rubbing his head where he'd hit it on the coupling pole. "You ain't goin' to kill me—"

"I wouldn't. Not now. I saved you, so far. I'd save anybody, even a skunk like you, from dyin' out there. Fork 'er over."

Nero passed his six-shooter across to Waspy. Waspy emptied it, put it behind him at the far end of his little space under the wagon. He settled down, while the wind buffeted the tarps that formed the sides of their shelter.

"How's it you was out afoot?" Waspy demanded.

"Me. I—uh, oh, I got off to fix my cinch, an' my horse run off."

"Don't lie!" Waspy snarled. "An' get that look off your ugly face. You ain't comin' at me an' choke my gizzard out. You know I'd use this smokepole if you did. You keep your end. Now, how is it you was afoot? I know damn well you was butcherin' one of my yearlin's under cover of the storm. I found it. You lie to me—"

"That's right!" Nero babbled. "We saw you was gone. There wasn't only smoke comin' out your cabin chimley. We beefed the yearlin'. Gar went back

after the wagon, or a packhorse, while I skunned it out. A blast of wind sent my horse to runnin' for home. Then it got worse. Gar, I reckon he's lost. I started walkin'. Bigod, I left my knife stickin' in that carcass!"

"Never mind that." This information pleased Waspy, though. He hadn't noticed a knife. "I bet Gar ain't lost, neither. Bet he's warm an' safe by the fire. Now, don't talk no more. An' don't sit there figgerin' how to kill me to shut me up. Lay down!"

The afternoon went on. It was cold under the wagon, but the piling snow gave enough warmth to keep a man alive, although the hours dragged miserably. The light through the canvas, dim at best, faded. It was dark, cold, damp. Nero complained.

"Shut up!" Waspy croaked. "An' don't come at me in this dark. Ol' men—you said I was ol'—don't need so much sleep. I'll be a-sittin' here awake when you make a play. Sittin' with this ol' pistolian cocked."

WIND, snow, damnable cold that chilled and ached the bones. It seemed a month, two months. Nero stirred, groaned, was quiet at Waspy's commands. "What you gripin' for?" Waspy jeered. "I done saved your life, ain't I. Shut up."

This blizzard might last a day, or three days. Waspy wondered how long he could stay awake. He could have run Nero out into the blizzard and let him freeze, but it never occurred to Waspy Kevin to pull a stunt like that. In this sort of weather, men had to pull together; and old cowhands had to help those who hadn't brains to pull out themselves. That was a strict range law.

Toward morning, the wind died perceptibly. The pick of snow against the canvas became softer. It was a warming thing to Waspy Kevin. This blizzard was short-lived.

Grayish light illuminated their surroundings then, and the thinking Waspy had been doing throughout the night was heading up. Nero dozed. Waspy snarled at him, got him awake. Again Nero cracked his head on the coupling pole.

Waspy pocketed Nero's gun. "Crawl out," he rapped.

They pushed out into a gray-lighted world blanketed in white. Snow was piled almost to the top of the wagon on the windward side; in gullies and depressions, behind bushes. But the force of the wind had held it from deepening too much out across the flats. Wind still blew, but not very strongly; it still snowed a little bit.

Waspy, looking around, glimpsed the line of trees along the creek, five miles away. Nero noted that. "I'm headin' for home," he croaked, and started out without a word of thanks.

"If your home is hell, you are," Waspy said thinly. "Here."

He tossed Nero his gun. "Fill 'er up, damn you. We're goin' to end this thing. You'd never rest until you done me up, or I got you. No need of draggin' 'er along."

Nero's eyes narrowed, his tongue caressed his thick lips. He fumbled the weapon eagerly, and his thoughts were almost spoken words that said here was his chance. Kill old Waspy, bury him in a drift. Maybe, when he was found, come spring, coyotes would have got to him, or folks would think he'd gone loco in the storm and shot himself.

Hands on his hips, Waspy, head cocked to one side, watched Nero. Nero, figuring to kill the man who'd saved his life. Yeah, the world was best off without Nero's kind.

"Wait'll I fill this shooter," Nero mumbled. He thumbed a shell from his belt. Waspy was backing slowly away from him, his old eyes keen with years of wisdom. His fingers curled around the butt of his hol-

stered gun. Nero put a cartridge into the cylinder. He started to push another in. The cylinder rolled, clicked four times. One more click, and that shell would explode if the hammer fell.

Nero seemed to have difficulty getting the other shell inserted. The loading gate flipped down, and the barrel was in Waspy's direction. Waspy yanked his old cutter just as Nero eared the hammer back. Waspy's gun roared hellishly in this white, quiet world and he flung himself aside. Nero's slug missed him by a hair.

"A skunk to the last. Figger I never knowed that ol' loadin' stunt?" he snarled.

Nero didn't hear him. Nero was on his back, knocked flat. He rolled now, leaving red stains in the disturbed snow. He struggled like a poisoned wolf, quivered, opened his mouth to emit a rush of crimson, and ceased to move.

Waspy hesitated, sighed deeply, and turned toward home.

His cattle had taken refuge along the creek. That was one gall off his mind. He got his saddle horse from the stable, put another cartridge in his gun and rode to make a call on Mister Gar.

Gar opened the door at Waspy's command. This weak sister, as Waspy had figured him, bowed and scraped and tried to be affable, now that Nero wasn't here.

"You know where Nero is?" Waspy snarled.

Gar looked frightened. "I never meant to leave him. But I couldn't never found him in that storm," Gar squeaked.

"Nero," Waspy said pointedly, staring hard at Gar, "is made a confession about butchered beef. He—he's left the country, see? I saved his life in the blizzard. He come clean with me."

"It was—was Nero always done things," Gar quavered. He was back-

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ing away from Waspy now, all the color gone from his thin face. His prominent Adam's apple bobbed frantically.

Waspy's hand dropped, rose, his gun in it. "Get your clothes on," he ordered. "I'm takin' you in to the sheriff. I got Nero's statement, an' you'll go to the pen for a long, long time."

"No!" Gar shrilled. "Nero—you let him go. You saved him. Give me a chance. I'll go away. I'll never come back. I never wanted this cow business nohow."

"Where'd you steal your start?" Waspy was guessing now.

"Hundred or so miles south. We had to hide out. Feller, will you let me go?"

"But who's goin' to pay me for my stuff you kilt?"

"I ain't got no money."

"Then you can give me a quit-claim deed to this place. I still got homestead rights. Reckon I'll tack this on to the Three Links spread. Well? Just write 'er out on any kind of paper. I reckon Riley can fix 'er legal for me. An' another thing: you stop in town an' tell Riley to come out here. No need tellin' him another thing. Just say he's to come to my place. Then you go on. You don't do that, I'm comin' after you."

BILL DEVLIN came hurrying down from the Pitchfork that day to see how Waspy had weathered the blizzard. He got there about the same time Riley did. The three of them rode out to where the wagon marked the site of Gus Nero's death.

They rode on then, to the mound that was the carcass of Waspy's yearling. They found Nero's knife, his initials on the handle. Riley nodded, then shook his head.

"It's a mess," he conceded. "But you had the proof. There'll be no trouble over this a-tall."

"Just say Nero got indigestshun from eatin' too much gun pie," Waspy suggested. "An' say that Gar—well, he lost his appetite."

"But, look here, Waspy," Bill Devlin mumbled. "What in the hell did you save Nero for, take a chance on him getting you, and then have it out with him when the storm was done? Why take that chance? You could've driven on—"

"You wouldn't understand, Bill," Waspy cut in. "You're one of a different brand of cowhands. Your paw would've savvied. Maybe Riley does. A cowhand don't leave a man to freeze. An' when you tell a man he'll eat gun pie, you be sure an' cook 'er up for him."

Bill Devlin shook his head. And guessed he'd never understand.

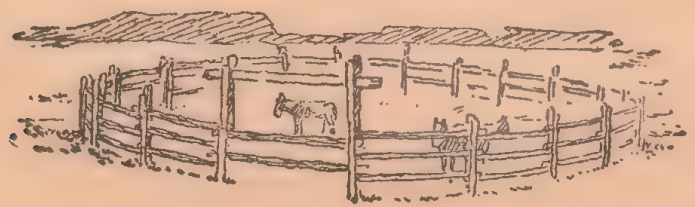
"Reckon you could let me have that extra hand now?" Waspy inquired as they rode back toward his place.

"Hell!" Bill snorted. "*You* don't need no help!"

Waspy's old eyes twinkled. "Sure, I do. A big ranch's got to have hands. And I got more land, I got more cows, an' I got gun pie on the cook for them as tries to stand my play."

He pushed his hat at a cocky angle over his left eye.

"Y'know, Bill, me, I got a idee that Three Links is spreadin' out. Don't call me a rancher any more. Me, I'm a cow *king* now."



When Old-Timer Thad Kelly Returned to

A Long Book-Length Novel

Screaming lead hailed about Weaver and his horse (Page 49)

BOSS of the

CHAPTER I

Out of the Past

"THERE! Your stage outfit's ready to roll, Matt," announced "Bun" Weaver, who'd been helping the hostler to hitch up the four horse team. "Now I'll take my reg'lar seat and—"

"Nix! Don't you climb up to my perch," objected Matt Jason, the fat stage driver. "I got a lady passenger today."

"So-o? That her coming yonder?"

"Uh-huh, and I done told her she could ride in front with me. Yuh'll have to set inside . . . Hey! What's this, Bun? A ten spot!"

"Yeah, Matt, and it's all yores if—Well, if yuh're so spifflocated yuh can't drive, savvy? And I'm obliged to handle yore ribbons for yuh!"

Jason reached for the ten dollar bill.

"Say, yuh always make up your mind that sudden? Well, she's shore

Bun Weaver Battles Treachery with Flaming

the Diamond H, All Hell Broke Loose!

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Author of "Stampeded," "Thunder Canyon," etc.

LONGHORN

the niftiest li'l lady I've clapped eyes on in many—"

"Same here, Matt." Young Weaver's brown eyes danced with mischief and excitement. "She's pritter'n a deer standin' against a clear mountain lake at sundown. Git busy, actin', Matt. Quick!"

The stage driver lurched against Bun Weaver.

"Time we wash pullin' out," he mumbled. "Lemme climb up and—"

Placing one foot on a wheel hub, he reached for the rail and suddenly fell sprawling on the plank sidewalk. He tugged off his woe-begone hat, stared owlishly about him.

"I mished!" he grunted.

Not six feet distant the girl had halted. Her eyes—Weaver saw they were the deep blue of mountain skies after sunset—darted from the apparently helpless stage driver to the young owner of the Tincup spread at Last Stand. Weaver swept off his new white Stetson, uncovering curly black

Guns and Makes a Bull's-eye for Justice!

hair and revealing more clearly his lean-cheeked, darkly tanned face with its straight nose, firm-lipped, determined mouth, and expressive brown eyes.

His unbuttoned vest showed a white shirt, and a blue tie, both as new and fresh as the hat. The striped trousers hid the tops of plain, worn riding boots.

WHAT a nice-looking cowboy, Janet Kelly thought. Polite, too. But his new clothes made her painfully conscious of her own worn, corduroy divided skirt, her once-white silk blouse now about ready to fall to pieces and her shabby Stetson.

"Hey, what ails you, Matt?" The stage superintendent came bustling from the office. "Git on yore feet!"

The hostler, who was still holding the lead team, hid a grin. He had witnessed the little by-play.

"Aw, Matt's soused again," he said.

Matt Jason was starting to sing. The superintendent shook him, then glowered.

"How the billy hell's this rig goin' to git over the road with a drunk driver?"

The coach door popped open and two passengers stepped out.

"Another monotonous delay," one said.

"Oh, there you are, Sis," the other called. "What's the matter with our skinner?"

Bun Weaver pivoted to look at the speaker, a boy of about fourteen. A fine, clean-cut lad, with the same dark coloring as his sister, the same deep blue eyes and the raven-wing hair, the same proud lift of his head and the same stubborn chin and generous lips.

"Driver snooted?" the boy said. "That's doggoned funny when—"

Bun Weaver's voice lifted. "I kin tool the hosses over the road," he told the superintendent. "Matt'll be all right to bring the stage back tomorrow."

He picked up the driver bodily and heaved him none too gently into the coach.

"All aboard! Let me help yuh to the front seat, Miss."

The girl felt herself being lifted. She caught hold of the seat rail, hesitating for a moment while she looked down into those mischievous brown eyes. Then, with a laugh, she settled down in the high seat as Bun Weaver quickly unwound the lines from the brake.

He glanced quickly at the boy, who was opening his lips. That boy was about to spill the beans sure.

"Aboard!" he yelled. "We're rollin'!"

Young Billy Kelly leaped into the moving coach, as the superintendent shouted:

"Bun Weaver, I shure appreciate this accommodation."

For some reason this remark erased the smile from the girl's lips. When Weaver glanced at her he saw she was sitting stiffly as far from him as she could get and staring straight ahead. Her lips were tight; her face a trifle pale.

"Anything wrong?" the young cowman inquired as he eased the team across the railroad tracks and out onto the dusty, winding north road.

"Nothing," she said tonelessly.

The September sun had climbed over the mountain range to eastward, had dispelled the mist which hung above shadowy canyons and was now beaming down upon this grayish-brown land of sage and grass. But Weaver felt as if the air had suddenly chilled.

"Going to Last Stand?" he ventured.

"Yes."

"Mighty good cow country round about Last Stand. The Longhorn they called it."

When she made no comment he began to whistle. If she wanted to be a human icicle that was her business.

JUST being near her did things to a man, though; made him glad to be alive. But it was a darned shame if the trip was going to be wasted. Who the dickens was she, anyhow? A schoolma'am? Nope. Wasn't dressed nifty enough. Her brother was with her, too, and it was plain he was range-raised. So was she. Lot of little things to show she wasn't a greenhorn or new to the West.

Weaver would like to be more than just friends with this girl. But how could he batter down her cold reserve?

"I got a ranch on Crazy Creek up in the Longhorn country," he remarked after some miles of silence. "Bachelor spread since my mother died, a year ago. I'm on my way home from shipping my feeders and fat cows. When I stepped off the train and shuffled over to the stage station I couldn't help wondering where a girl like you had been hiding all these years."

He waited, but evidently the girl—she had almost smiled—didn't consider an answer necessary. Weaver tugged his big hat down over his ears, and drawled: "Guess that'll do for a skull cap. Wish I had my mittens and overshoes."

"Why?" She glanced at him, surprised.

"Why, if I was all bundled up mebbe I wouldn't feel such a cold draft. . . . Any particular need of turning on the wintry blasts quite so strong?"

At last he had broken the girl's reserve. She was smiling, and when Jan Kelly smiled the dimples that came into her cheeks made her still more adorable.

"If you must talk," she observed, "tell me some more about yourself."

"Never mind 'bout me. I've been in that Cragmont town we just left quite a bit off and on. It's where we get our grub and we ship our cattle. Yet I've never caught sight of you there."

"We don't belong in Cragmont. Billy and I just stopped there last night to catch the stage this morning."

Weaver laughed. "Glad there's been no oversight on my part," he said. And as they topped a rise: "Well, here we are on top of the divide. Like to hear about this country we're lookin' down on?"

She nodded and he went on: "See them high mountains off to the north? Sorta purple in the sunlight, with every gulch crowded with the red and gold of quakies just turned by early frost. I love this country, shut off from the rest of the world like 'tis, and fall's the prettiest time of year. That's the Silver Tip Range curvin' around on the east and north. Rough country and still plenty wild.

"Not many ranches in the basin. The Longhorn River drains it. Flows out through a deep gorge in the mountains and across the desert. It's all desert for miles and miles over to the west. Sheep country . . . Interested?"

"Yes."

"THAT'S dandy. Ever hear the story of the settling of the Longhorn? . . . Long time ago, leastwise I was jest a kid of ten and I'm twenty-two now, a bunch of settlers hit this country. About a dozen single men—several of 'em working for Martin Malden, who was bringin' a couple hundred head of cattle along with him, and eight families. All had covered wagons, horses, milk cows, even some pigs and chickens; household goods; everything to start up homes and ranches.

"These people—my dad and mother were two of 'em—wasn't riff-raff or gold seekers or nesters as yuh generally speak of nesters. They was steady, reliable folks, bent on goin' into the cow business.

"One of 'em, Jerome Leckenby, had found this good country a year before, wide open, not a house or a fence; game and fish and grass, reg'lar Paradise. But when we got there a cow-

man from Texas was ahead of us."

"You admit he was ahead of you?" the girl interrupted, and Bun Weaver wondered why her eyes had kindled so strangely.

"Uh-huh," he said. "This Texan's name was Bill Kelly, and he was a tough and knotty customer. Had five thousand longhorn cows and a salty crew of riders. Had his wife and family with him, too, and his brother Thad as *segundo* of the outfit. He was his own foreman.

"Makin' a long story short, Kelly told us settlers to git. Well, Jerome Leckenby had found out about the country first. And Kelly didn't have no title to any land, though he'd built a home. Our bunch tried to argue with this stubborn cowman, they tell me, that there was room for all. He couldn't see it and opened the fight by murdering old Dad McNulty in cold blood."

"No!" Janet cried, but the rattling of the stage wheels over the rocks prevented his reading any special meaning in the exclamation.

"Yeah our folks fought and whipped 'em," he said. "It was mighty bad, them days. Many a lonely grave is filled with men of our side. But the whole Kelly outfit was wiped out 'cept old Bill Kelly, his family—we didn't make war on women—and his brother, Thad Kelly.

"Thad got away, and some said he'd headed back to Texas. But he mighta died. Nobody knew for shore. They do say he swore he'd come back some day with plenty rifles and men to make it hot for us. He hasn't yet."

With surprise Bun Weaver noticed how tense the girl was; like a beautiful bird ready to wing away in alarm.

"What happened to Bill Kelly's family?" she asked.

Weaver shook his head. Them Kellys wasn't native Texans," he said. "They were Irish, but cowmen from the word go. Bill was a tough old ranger; ornery and bull-headed as a balky mule. But he was so badly shot up he had to listen to reason from our leader—that's Malden, 'Diamond H' Malden. After the big fight he took over the Kelly brand and ranch, the Diamond H." For a moment young Weaver's lips tightened. "I kin remember it all like yesterday, even if I was just a kid and all I had to do with it was to bury my father and my two older brothers. Kelly lead got 'em."

HE paused and gazed bleakly at the dusty brown road winding down the side of the mountain.

"'Course that's all in the past," he said dully. "Yet yuh might say I took up a man's load right then. My mother filed on land and she got her share of the Diamond H herd, which was our start. Malden was a fair man, honest as they come. He played fair with Bill Kelly, too."

"Yes? Tell me. How did he play fair?"

"Glad I found somethin' to interest yuh, Miss." Weaver's smile disclosed his even white teeth. "Well, it was like this. We settlers bought Kelly's cattle and horses. Five thousand head of dogies at ten dollars a head—a liberal price for them scrubby Texas cows; one hundred saddle horses, for a couple thousand dollars more.

"We didn't have no money, and to pay Kelly we give him a promissory note signed by eight ranchers. My mother was one of 'em.

"Kelly agreed. Malden give him his work horses and wagon and food enough to take him and his family away somewhere. When they left Mrs. Kelly was drivin' the team and nursin' a baby. She had two other kids with her to take care of, besides Kelly. He was packin' too much lead to be of any use jest then. . . . Why, what's the matter, miss? Yuh're cryin'!"

"It's nothing," Janet said hastily. "Only—only it's such a sad story."

Suddenly she burst out: "Oh, why does there have to be war on the ranges? Even the winners suffer. You said your family suffered."

"Did they! I'd shore never let old man Kelly git away if it hadn't been for his family. I hate all Kellys! Hate 'em to this day."

"Do you?" Jan Kelly drew her breath in sharply. "Hatred is one of the fruits of war. I, too—" She checked herself. "Mr. Weaver, did you ever again hear

Janet Kelly

of the man who got away, Thad Kelly?"

"Nope. If he'd been goin' to make trouble, he'd a popped up long before this. Even if that tough nut, Thad Kelly, should still be alive, his guns are spiked now. We paid off the debt two years ago. Pretty nigh busted me to raise my share."

"You—you paid off this note two years ago?" The girl was leaning slightly toward Weaver. Her blue eyes, no longer tear-misted, seemed to be looking right into his brain.

The stage had by now dropped from the mountains and the team was plodding doggedly across sagebrush benchland toward the town of Last Stand.

"Yeah, and somethin' mighty queer about it came up recent," Weaver said. He pushed back his hat and a sudden flash of anger lighted the dark brown eyes. "Some slicker or skinflint has been writing all of us letters demanding we pay Kelly's debt to his oldest daughter. Made me plenty smoky, when Kelly's family must know the obligation's been paid."

"They don't know anything of the kind!" the girl said wildly. "The debt which now amounts to over one hundred thousand dollars, has not been paid and I have come to the Longhorn with my brother to collect it! I'm Janet Kelly."

IF a stick of dynamite had exploded under the rolling wheels of the stage Bun Weaver could not have been more astounded. He felt a flush run up his bronzed neck to spread over his face.

He'd made a dead-set at this girl, and here she was the daughter of the man who had been his bitterest enemy; the man whose cowboy had shot Bun Weaver's father and his two brothers!

"It's true, Bun Weaver!" Janet said. *"The old note has not been paid!* I wrote those letters after"—her voice caught—"after we'd buried my daddy. Of course you're not interested in our struggles after we were driven out of the Longhorn, but you might be interested to know that it was not until my father was on his death-bed that he told us of the note, of the debt the ranchers of the Longhorn owed him."

"I reckon that's kinda hard to believe, miss," Weaver said soberly. No warmth in his voice. "I'm sorry—but the blunt fact is that two years ago your father himself came to the Diamond H, and collected the debt in good hard cash. If you don't believe me, go talk to Malden or any of the ranchers."

He shrugged.

"Well, here we are pulling into Last Stand. This trip's been an—an experi-

ence. . . .Good-by."

The stage had wheeled past a weather-beaten livery stable, a smoky blacksmith shop, a saloon painted a vivid yellow, and a paintless store, to stop in front of a two story log shack over which was the sign:

LAST STAND HOTEL AND POST OFFICE

WEAVER jumped lightly down from the seat as a wizened old fellow stepped out of the hotel, calling, "Letter for you, Bun."

Weaver snatched the envelope, thrust it in his vest pocket and strode on to the livery stable, stunned and strangely shaken.

"Did Fred bring me a hoss?" he curtly asked the hostler. The whole world was at sixes and sevens all because he'd met the smartest girl in the world and she had turned out to be a Kelly! And what in the seven kinds of blue smoke was she trying to put over?

"Fred ain't been in," said the liveryman. "But I'll loan yuh a hoss to git out to the Tincup. . . . You sufferin' from a hangover?"

"Git me the hoss and shut up."

An hour later Bun Weaver dropped down the hillside into the valley of Crazy Creek and discovered that not a cow was in sight; not a horse. Passing around a turn in the valley he drew rein sharply and stared. Only the charred and blackened ruins of his buildings met his gaze. House, bunkhouse and stable had been burned to the ground!

Stunned, the cowman rubbed his sleeve across his eyes and the movement of his arm rustled the letter in his pocket.

He drew it forth, stared at the postmark, "Nugget, Colorado," then ripped it open and read:

Mr. Weaver, Dear Sir: This is to let you know that Thad Kelly is back to collect by force. Yours, Janet Kelly.

CHAPTER II.

At the Diamond H

WITHIN a few minutes after the Tincup cowboy had, almost curtly, left Jan Kelly at Last Stand, she had decided to start with her brother at once for the Diamond H ranch.

They had hired horses at the livery stable and were ready to leave when, somewhat to Jan's dismay the man who had been the other passenger in the stage asked to accompany them. He introduced himself as Ormond Van Ormond and was plainly a tenderfoot.

"Shore," said Billy Kelly at once. "Van and me got 'quainted in the stage, Jan, and he's a good hombre, even if he is a greenhorn."

Jan withheld her judgment. They followed a wagon road northward across a rough country of deep valleys and high hills that led back to the blue-green, canyon-scarred mountains lifting tier on tier in the background. Jan and her brother rode in front, with Van Ormond a little distance behind them.

"To think all of this should have belonged to Dad—to us, Jan," mourned young Kelly. "Gosh, I don't remember none of it. Too young when we drifted outa here, I reckon."

"Doesn't look as I thought it would," said Jan. "I was only seven, yet some terrible things still stick in my mind . . . Billy, if it wasn't for Mother and the three little kids I'd go home without trying to collect that money. Everybody in this country hates the Kellys, and Bun Weaver told me the most amazing thing."

"What? I saw he'd fussed yuh a-plenty. Darn his hide! Well, I ain't

scared. If these doggoned ranchers don't cough up, I'll make 'em."

That idea was so ridiculous that Jan laughed.

"Billy, don't go jumping on Bun Weaver. He's—" she flushed as she caught her brother looking at her shrewdly.

"Uh-huh," he remarked. "But don't you go fallin' for no buzzard in this neck of the woods, Jan. Remember what they done to Dad . . . What'd Weaver tell yuh?"

"He said the note had been paid. He said Dad himself collected the debt. But that's impossible!"

"Course," flashed Billy. "Dad never left our place near Nugget after we got settled. How could he a-been up here in the Longhorn? Besides, he never said nothin' about the debt 'til he knew he was goin' to die. Just six weeks ago."

Janet's face and eyes clouded. She was thinking of all she had been told about the horror of the war in the Longhorn, her family's flight from that torn land, the marvelous fortitude and endurance of her frontier mother; the camps by night, and the long weary treks by day, through the mountains on dim and awesome trails.

Nearly two hundred miles from Longhorn River they had come to a new and rip-roaring mining town. There they had stopped because their team, their funds, their food were all exhausted.

WITH stoicism and fortitude Mrs. Kelly had gone to work and before long Bill Kelly had been able to assume some responsibilities. Lean years followed, though, hard years when the family lived mostly on beef or wild game and fish, and Mrs. Kelly made their clothing of tanned skins.

Years when Janet remembered her father as a silent, embittered man, his left arm hanging uselessly at his side, limping painfully as he went about his tasks. When idle he fell to brooding. At such times his rugged face was set, grim, terrible.

There had been three children when the family had fled from the Longhorn. Two more had come along in the five years following that flight.

Always when brooding, Bill Kelly had stared off into the southeast, in the direction of Texas and his lips would move.

"Thad Kelly'll come," he'd say. "Thad'll never go back on me."

Jan knew he was thinking of revenge, of that day when Thad Kelly would return with fighting men and whip the ranchers who had stolen from Bill Kelly his range and his cattle. But Thad Kelly had not come, though Bill Kelly had sent word of where he was back to their old home in Texas. Janet's mother believed Thad was dead, and in her secret heart was relieved. Martha Kelly had seen quite enough of range wars.

And so the years rolled on. The Kelly children got their schooling in Nugget. The big world outside was unknown to them save through hearsay. Miners, freighters and cowboys talked of that world; told how the West was settling up "so doggone fast the cow outfits has been squeezed out by the barb-wire sod-busters"; told how a railroad had driven into Cragmont and was building on across the mighty Rockies.

The mines at Nugget had finally petered out, leaving it a ghost town. Only a store, a post office, a livery stable and a saloon remained of its one-time glory. The Kelly family found it harder than ever to make ends meet. Through all those lean years they'd had no friends. Except one. Frank Newhouse, old Bill Kelly's one hired man, had stood by them. He hadn't seemed to care whether or not he got his wages. But he'd gone away, too, two years ago. Still he had come back just when he'd been needed most—just

before Kelly's death, and offered to take up his old job.

Jan vividly remembered how, when her father had known he was dying, he had called his wife, Jan and young Billy to his side. For the first time Jan had learned of how the Longhorn ranchers had promised to pay fifty-two thousand dollars for the Diamond H cattle and horses and had given a promissory note due in twelve years.

"I never figgered to try to collect that way," Bill Kelly explained. "Figgered to go back and take what was mine—blast them fellers plumb to hell, too! But Thad ain't never showed up and you folks need the money, a big chunk of it. They got to pay, too, 'cause that note carries eight signatures and would stand up in court.

"All shot to pieces like I was and scarce able to set up while I was watchin' 'em sign that paper, I hid it the minute they left me alone in the cabin. Scared they'd steal it. That note's hid in the cabin Thad and me built when we started the Diamond H. Above the fireplace they's a pair of extra fine long and curvin' steer horns, fastened together by a strip of rawhide. The note's inside the left horn. I knew when I hid it that it'd be the last place them fellers'd ever think o' lookin'."

JAN had learned then, too, that Bill Kelly, in the years immediately following his flight from the Longhorn, had been held up by masked men three times, had been searched and threatened with death unless he revealed the whereabouts of the promissory note.

"I never found out who them holdups was," whispered the dying man. "If I'd been younger, stronger, able to ride and to use a gun like I could once, I'd a trailed 'em down, even if they did back water when they found they couldn't bluff me. But, Jan honey, that slip o' paper's dynamite. Don't trust nobody nor send nobody to git it an' collect. Do it yoreself."

Riding now on her mission, Jan felt hot tears sting her eyes. Her father hadn't been sympathetic. He'd been a gruff, sombre, forbidding man, brooding over injustice, embittered, revengeful. Though himself unable to wreak vengeance for which he always longed he sought, he still had lived in the hope that Thad Kelly would return and "clean up them damned ranchers." And although Jan had loved this harsh and bitter man, she found it hard to forgive him for not trying to collect long ago.

She had never known even the simplest luxuries; had never owned pretty things such as girls love. Ever since the tragedy on the Longhorn the family had been poverty stricken, and now Mrs. Kelly's health was failing, and they were in dire need. The money would mean everything to them, so Jan would get it—if possible.

But had Bud Weaver lied? He didn't look to be the sort who would lie about any matter so terribly serious.

The voice of Ormond Van Ormond broke into her thoughts.

"May I ride up beside you awhile?" he asked. "It's lonesome trailing."

"Of course," said Jan.

Again she sized up this stranger who wore glasses—they were dark lenses, and shadowed his eyes—in a land where glasses were almost unknown. His face was full and round and red. He wore a sandy mustache and might have been thirty or fifty for all the girl could tell. He rode well for a tenderfoot, she thought, and seemed to know how to handle a horse. All she knew about him was that he had come West on a rather vague mission to find a missing brother, he said. And he didn't seem at all sure in which direction to look.

Billy Kelly was looking the tenderfoot over with a hint of disapproval.

"Why don't you throw them city duds away and dress like a cowpuncher, Mr. Van Ormond?" he asked. "Mebbe yuh'd fool folks into thinkin' yuh

wasn't no pilgrim."

The man's enigmatic answer set Jan to wondering anew about Ormond Van Ormond, for he said, "I could fool nobody that way." To Jan it seemed almost as if he meant, "But I can fool 'em this way."

On and on they rode while the westering sun dipped lower, its slanting rays picking out the high, craggy peaks of Silver Tip Range. Peaks already whitened with the first snows of autumn. Twilight was upon the land when at length the three reached the Diamond H on Longhorn River. Here the hills rolled back from the river, whose wide valley was dotted with haystacks, filled with cattle. Dense willows hid the stream itself from sight.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Billy. "Some outfit. And to think this is where we'd a lived, Jan; the outfit we'd a had if—"

THE ranch buildings, log barns, sheds, corrals, a blacksmith shop, bunkhouse, cook shack and a brand new ranch house, nestled in the lea of a wooded bluff. The mountains rose abruptly in the background.

"Oh," cried Jan, eyes shining, "this *is* a ranch! No wonder Dad always wanted to get it back!"

"Your father once own this?" inquired Van Ormond.

But she didn't answer. She was looking eagerly for the oldest building of them all, a one-room log cabin built against the bluff. Was it still standing? If not, where would those precious steer horns be found?

Ah, the weathered old cabin was still there! Behind the ranch house from which a man had emerged.

As this man advanced to meet the visitors, Janet Kelly felt his forcefulness, his commanding presence. He was big, with heavy features and a determined mouth. The hair at his temples and above his ears was snow white; so too, were his bushy, overhanging eyebrows. The eyes were the pale gray of winter ice.

Bun Weaver

Janet's mother had described Martin Malden, now known as "Diamond H" Malden to the girl. The man who had led the fight against Bill Kelly and had won it. Janet had seen Malden when she was only seven and had hated him with all a child's fierce hatred. So, although the years had wrought changes in the man's appearance she knew him instantly. Here stood the big boss of the Longhorn.

Malden removed his huge black hat, creased precisely down the center of its high crown, and bowed.

"Welcome to the Diamond H, Miss Kelly and young Bill," he said smoothly. "I've had rooms fixed for yuh. And for you too, sir,"—to Van Ormond—"though I don't know yore name. I'm Diamond H. Malden."

Immediately introducing himself and stating that he was searching for his brother who had left home twenty years ago, Van Ormond swung off to shake hands with the rancher.

"You were expecting us, Mr. Malden!" Jan said, astonished. "I—I don't

know that we can stay here—or should. You see we—came about that old debt to my father."

Malden elevated his white eyebrows; a slight smile twitched his full lips. Drawing a billfold from his hip pocket, he took from it a slip of paper which he handed to the girl.

"The original note," he said. "Marked 'Paid' and signed by William Kelly. . . . Ho, Snip, come git our visitors' hosses and take care of 'em."

Jan slipped from her saddle and surrendered her horse to the cowhand who came running at Malden's call. Her trembling hands unfolded the age-yellowed piece of paper. She read:

Twelve years after date we promise to pay to William Kelly or to his lawful heirs the sum of fifty-two thousand dollars with interest at six per cent compounded annually.

Eight signatures followed. Jan glanced at them, then turned over the note to see written in what certainly appeared to be her father's hand:

Paid in full. September 29, 18— William Kelly.

"Lemme see, Jan." Billy was at her shoulder.

NUMBLY Jan handed her brother the scrap of paper. She fought to control her whirling thoughts. Here was evidence that the debt had indeed been paid; that the ranchers of the Longhorn owed the Kelly family not one cent.

"No savvy this a-tall," announced young Billy, his voice shrill with anger. "Malden, if that dinero was collected, some damn thievin' sidewinder done it."

"I wonder if that was it?" thought Jan, wishing she could read something from Malden's poker features, his winter-ice eyes. "Or did these ranchers simply have some expert penman among them forge Dad's signature without ever paying anybody—anybody—a dime?"

Suddenly noticing Van Ormond's curious interest she interrupted young Billy's heated remarks to the effect that it was plain impossible for Bill Kelly to have collected the money himself.

"Isn't that Dad's old cabin back near the foot of the hill, Mr. Malden?" she asked. "I do so want to see it. May I?"

Without waiting for a reply, she ran to the cabin. She tugged the sagging door outward to open it. The interior was dark and musty smelling. Lighting a match she saw the only window—a tiny window—coated with cobwebs; the dusty, earthen floor littered with junked pieces of homemade furniture. Obviously no one used this shack.

The fireplace was at the farther end. Lighting another match, she advanced quickly, her eyes eagerly swept the blackened and dusty log wall above the ancient mantel.

Bound together by a strip of rawhide was the pair of long, curved steer horns. They did not look as if they had been disturbed. She was feverishly impatient to tear them down and discover whether the original promissory note was still in the hiding place old Bill Kelly had selected for it.

But the match burned her fingers and went out just as a smooth voice said behind her:

"Pardon me, Miss Kelly. I'm Mace Malden, Diamond H's oldest son. Supper'll be ready right soon. We have another woman on the place so yuh won't feel all alone. Won't yuh come to the house?"

Janet stepped out to face a blond young man who was the image of his father. In one hand he had her small bag; in the other Van Ormond's huge satchel. He was polite, but the way he looked at the girl sent a shiver down her back. Instinctively she distrusted him even more than she did his father. Intuition told her that young Mace Malden was thoroughly bad. Yet she smiled and said:

"How do you do? Thank you, I'll be glad to go to the house." Under her breath she added, "And sometime tonight I'll visit this old cabin again!"

CHAPTER III

Flag of Truce

SUPPER at the Diamond H was a silent and, to Jan, rather trying meal, for she could not forget that she and her brother were now under the roof of the man who had been her father's and her Uncle Thad's bitterest enemy.

At the table, in addition to the three guests, were Malden, his son Mace, and three hired hands—the slender youth called "Snip," a stooped grey-beard who did the chores, and a wicked-eyed fellow of about thirty who answered to the name of "Bronc."

Jan had known Diamond H was a widower with two sons, Mace and "Flash." She wondered why Flash was not present; where the rest of Malden's crew might be; and why the hired men ate in the ranchhouse dining room.

The meal was served by a stolid, flat-faced, non-communicative woman who had been introduced to Jan as "Big Stella." When Stella had shown the girl to an upstairs room, Jan had attempted to open a conversation.

"How'd Mr. Malden know we were coming?"

"Laws, he knows everything."

"I see." Janet didn't see at all." You've been here a long time, Stella?"

"Quite a spell. . . . Well, I got to be gittin' the grub on."

All through supper young Billy Kelly scowled at his plate, wolfing his food in somber silence. As soon he had finished he stalked out to the bunkhouse with Bronc. Malden lifted his white eyebrows and said softly to Mace:

"The young man seems sort of huffy."

Jan found herself hating them both. This situation was more than embarrassing. She'd leave just as soon as she found that note. Yet if she found it what could she prove? She did not know.

Supper over, she was left alone in the large living room. Her boots sank into costly Navajo rugs. She sat in a half-dozen different rustic chairs to see which was the most comfortable, and wished some one had made a fire in the massive rock fireplace. The finest kerosene lamps she had ever seen lighted up a noble array of deer and elk, mountain-sheep and bear heads on the walls.

One corner of this great room served as Malden's office. A huge desk stood there, beside it a filing cabinet and a small steel safe.

Her attention attracted by rapid hoofbeats, the girl moved to a window and saw three riders pull up in the wide lane of lamplight pouring from the open door of the bunkhouse. Diamond H Malden, with Mace and Bronc, immediately stepped outside. Van Ormond and young Billy promptly followed.

Jan heard one of the horsemen—a brown-bearded fellow, obviously a rancher—shout tensely:

"Hi, Diamond H! Did yuh know Thad Kelly was back?"

"And the sidewinder's whittlin' on our herds!" yelped one of the other riders.

"Ain't jest a-whittlin'!" the third man exploded. "Thad Kelly's long-loopin' riders shot two of my punchers! Whooped off all my cattle."

JAN held her breath, every nerve taut as wire.

"Yeah, he's hit us like a thunder-

clap," the first speaker growled. "Sam McNulty's cattle's been stole; two men kilt. Bun Weaver's buildings has been burnt to the ground, his stock whooped into the hills, and his man, Four Dot Fred, shot dead."

"Bun Weaver's buildings burned!" Jan whispered. "His cattle stolen! I can't believe. . . . Thad Kelly, my uncle! It can't be!"

"Where's yore outfit, Malden?" a harsh voice was yammering. "We got to be hittin' the trail. We've sent men to rally every cowpuncher and rancher on the Longhorn. Ordered 'em to meet at Windy Hollow jest this side of Cougar Canyon. But we need you to lead us, 'course, and—"

"Yuh say killin's been done?" Malden ejaculated, his features hardening. "As well as rustling? How many men with Kelly? Has anybody seen the renegade?"

"Well, no," gritted a rancher. "But the three of us here was warned. We got letters from Janet Kelly, old Bill Kelly's daughter, I reckon. First one politely requested me to pay the Bill Kelly debt to his daughter. The second one says that so long as she didn't git it that Thad Kelly's back to collect by force."

Jan felt as if this were a nightmare. She had written no such a letter to anyone. In the yellow light she could see Billy's face register amazed bewilderment.

"I also got two such identical letters from Miss Janet Kelly Leckenby," said Malden. "But the most astonishin' thing of all is that the girl and her brother—young Billy here—are at the Diamond H right now."

"They had the nerve to come here!" shouted one rancher. "Why, Malden? Why?"

"To collect a debt that's been paid, as we all kin testify," said Malden. Then sharply: "Light and step inside the bunkhouse, neighbors. I got a plan to stop this foolish damn war before more harm's done. Come in. You, too, Billy, and you, Mr. Van Ormond. No harm in you hearin' it."

The bunkhouse door closed, shutting off the light lane and all sound of voices. How cold the watching girl felt! Was that because of the chill of the large living room, or stark fear? She'd get her doe-skin jacket from her room upstairs and invade the bunkhouse herself.

Her worn boots made no sound on the stairs. Jan didn't know it, but there were other stairs at the far end of the upper hallway affording an exit at the rear of the house. Before she reached her own bedroom door, sounds inside the room assigned to Ormond Van Ormond caused her to pause; with her heart fluttering oddly, her breath catching in her throat.

Since he was out with the men, Van Ormond could not be in the room. Jan had heard Big Stella washing dishes in the kitchen. Who then—

A GUARDED whisper reached her ears.

"Anything there as'll give us a line on the geezer?"

"Nope. I've pawed all through his whoppin' big cowhide bag. Ain't no letters nor papers o' no kind; no gun nor no lawman's badge. Reckon he's jest what his looks says he is—a pilgrim. Take a squint outside. Anybody headin' this way yet?"

"Nope. Them ranchers, McNulty, Dell Floyd and Leckenby is climbin' on their hosses, though. . . . We gotta keep outa their sight. They ain't s'posed to find out nothin' about us bein' around."

Like a shadow Jan Kelly fled to her room. She held the door open a crack and heard the two prowlers depart by way of the back stairs. Shaken, it was minutes before she donned her jacket and returned to the living room. The voice of Mace Malden coming from the kitchen reached her.

"Yeah, that white dish rag'll do, Stella. I'll tie it to a long stick and carry it like a flag.... Where'm I goin'? Cougar Canyon, about seven-eight miles 'crost the hills. That's the canyon rustlers always has used and we figger Thad Kelly's camped up above there."

Thad Kelly! On winged feet Jan crossed the dining room. She must talk to Mace Malden. But before she burst into the kitchen the outer door had slammed and she heard him running toward the stable. Big Stella glanced up from scrubbing a skillet.

"They is a pitcher in your room and you can get hot water outa this reservoir on the range," she volunteered.

"Stella, are they—the Longhorn ranchers — going to attack Thad Kelly?" Jan demanded anxiously.

"Dunno. Mace wanted him somethin' white as'd show up in the dark. Flag o' truce, he called it. Ask the men. Somebody's in yonder room now."

A glance out into the dark yard showed Jan dimly that riders were leaving. A light at the stable was suddenly put out. The bunkhouse was still lighted, its door still open, but she saw no one there. Returning to the living room she found Van Ormond alone there, applying a match to his briar pipe.

"Malden has an unusually fine collection of heads, Miss Kelly," he said casually.

"Mr. Van Ormond," Jan said tensely, "what is Malden's plan and where's Billy?"

The man stepped closer, looked straight into the girl's eyes.

They were slugging each other in a silent, terrific battle (Page 40)

"Miss Kelly, have you had any word at all from your uncle, Thad Kelly?"

"No. Not in twelve years."

"Then you did not write this letter?" He unfolded a sheet of paper. "It was sent to Jerome Leckenby. He carelessly left it on the bunkhouse table."

In the bright lamplight, Jan looked at the letter. The writing was exactly like hers. It was the latter Leckenby said he had received, stating that Thad Kelly had returned to collect by force.

The girl's face flamed. "I didn't write it and don't know who did! I never saw it before."

"Thank you," said Van Ormond. "But how about this other letter?" He handed her another. "Did you write it, Miss Kelly?"

THIS also was addressed to Leckenby. It ran:

I am writing each of you eight original signers of the promissory note given to my father in payment for his Diamond H cattle twelve years ago. Please let me know if you can see your way clear toward settling this obligation in the near future. Yours truly, Janet Kelly.

"Yes, Mr. Van Ormond, I did write this," the girl said. "I wrote eight letters. None were answered, so Billy and I came to—"

"Leckenby and the two men with him said they did reply, telling you that the obligation had been paid."

"But we did not receive any answers at all! And now these—these letters I didn't write. . . . What does it mean, Mr. Van Ormond?"

Ormond Van Ormond spread out both letters atop a table and studied them critically.

"Forgery," he said. "Excellent work and most interesting. Here are the envelopes." He drew them from his pocket. "The forged letters as well as those you wrote were mailed at Nugget. Obviously the clever penman has tampered with your mail in Nugget, withholding the replies these ranchers sent to you. In all probability it was this same gentleman who appeared here just about two years ago, using the name of William Kelly to complete the transaction of the payment of the debt which these Longhorn men declare was paid in full to Bill Kelly himself two years ago."

Jan stared wide-eyed at the red-faced, homely man who looked like a tenderfoot.

"But—but it wasn't! Dad never even left Nugget after—"

"You're positive he didn't? Positive he was not away from home two years ago, Jan?"

"Dad never was off our little ranch at all! Not even for one single day!"

"I believe you, but these ranchers won't. I feel sure the three I just met, Jerome Leckenby, Sam McNulty and Dell Floyd are honest. That goes for Bun Weaver, too. I believe they did pay. But a clever crook got the money!"

"So it would seem, Mr. Van Ormond. . . . I'm so glad to have this talk with you. You clear things up as if—as if you knew how to get to the bottom of tangled, crooked work. But what shall I do now?"

"Who around your home town might be this clever forger?" Van Ormond asked.

Jan looked bewildered but before she could answer a heavy step sounded on the porch. Swiftly Van Ormond pocketed the two letters, and was nonchalantly relighting his pipe when Diamond H Malden entered the room.

"Comfortable, Miss Kelly?" he inquired blandly. "Thoughtless of me not to start a fire."

Jan faced the big man of the Longhorn, her head high, eyes flashing.

"Mr. Malden, I want you to know that neither Billy nor I had any least idea that Thad Kelly had come back! We've heard nothing from h i m; haven't seen him. We didn't know what we were getting into when we

came here on a peaceful—"

"Don't let it worry yuh, Miss Kelly," Malden interrupted suavely, and Jan saw that maddening, sardonic smile twitch his lips. "I've taken steps to spike yore uncle's guns."

JAN stared at him, startled.

"What steps? Oh, I hate range war, Mr. Malden! Hate it! I'll do everything I can to stop my uncle before. . . . I am the one to stop it. If I can only see Thad Kelly, I'm sure I could—"

"Yes, you're the one to stop it," said Malden. "I thought of that. And since all's fair in love and war I've sent word to this renegade rustler and killer, this cold-blooded, brutal, vengeful bandit who unfortunately happens to be yore relative, that unless he agrees to certain terms immediately somethin' he wouldn't like might happen to his niece."

For a minute Jan didn't get the full significance of this statement. When she did, all the breath seemed to leave her body. Limply she sank into a chair. Van Ormond, his back toward her, was gazing intently at an elk head and calmly blowing out clouds of pipe smoke as if that alone interested him.

With his pale, disconcerting eyes playing over the girl's features, Malden went on:

"We'll take good care of yuh, Miss Kelly. But don't try to git away. That might not be—so good—for yuh."

"And Billy? Is he a prisoner, too?" Jan asked huskily.

"No. Yore brother—and a hot tempered imp he is—was anxious to go with Mace. Not a bad idea. Billy kin let Thad Kelly know we're tellin' the truth, not bluffin'."

"Billy's gone with Mace Malden!" Jan's world was spinning. "And he didn't tell me! Oh, what will happen to him?"

"Nothin'." Malden shrugged.

"Won't it? Those two are trying to find some—some desperate men back in the mountains. There's a good chance they might be shot at sight!"

Malden's white eyebrows lifted. "That's a chance we had to take."

CHAPTER IV

Ambush at Cougar Canyon

FOLLOWING tracks left by his stolen herd, Bun Weaver had soon come upon the body of a man face down on the sod. It was his cowboy, "Four Dot Fred." A rifle bullet had pierced his skull.

Straightening up from his brief examination of the cold, stiff body of a man who had been his close friend, young Weaver felt such blind fury that only one idea was in his mind. He would trail the thieves and killers single-handed.

So Thad Kelly, who'd had a reputation among the Longhorn ranchers for being far more ruthless, savage and vindictive than old Bill Kelly, had at last come back! He had struck a dastardly blow. And it was bitter to think Thad Kelly was the uncle of that girl of the stage coach.

"And the worst of it," he growled. "Is that she's in with him. This letter shows that a plumb plenty!"

He cursed, spurring up the valley of Crazy Creek. Just as he'd thought, the cattle had turned off to the left and climbed the high hill. Cow thieves could not drive a herd up Crazy Creek. They'd be compelled to use Cougar Canyon as their trail back into the mountains of the Silver Tip Range. Above and beyond Cougar Canyon were many blind pockets suitable for holding a herd temporarily. Weaver

had hunted and prospected all of that wild country. He knew it as well as a city dweller knows his own back yard.

Where would this Kelly and his men be apt to be camped, waiting for darkness to cloak their movements? Weaver had reasoned this out and had started forward again when a glint of light—slanting rays of sunlight striking some bright object—a distant rock pile a-top the slope at his left caught his keen eyes.

He gave no sign of having seen that telltale glint. But the expression in his smoldering eyes became more savage. Up there on the hill a drygulcher was laying for him. Sure of that he veered off to the right and climbed a wooded ridge, following it upward for half a mile. Crossing the valley of Crazy Creek he circled back on the opposite side of the stream, thus getting behind the hidden marksman .

Presently he stopped for a moment, examined his sixshooter and then again rode cautiously forward. No sticks cracked under the tread of his horse in the soft, deep grass, no branches rustled as he threaded the open spaces in scrubby timber. He failed to find a saddle horse, which meant either that the fellow might be gone, or that he might be afoot. Nearer and nearer he moved toward that rock pile.

The man was still there. Weaver could see his shoulder and his black hat. He drew still closer, Colt in hand.

"Steady, hombre!" called the Tincup cowboy.

As swiftly as a deer jumps, the man bounded erect, whirled and fired. The smashing report of his rifle whipped across the hills and into the roar blended the harsh bark of Weaver's .44 as he spurred his horse to full gallop, swinging to one side. A rifle bullet ripped the high crown of the Tincup owner's new white Stetson; a six-shooter slug smashed into the other man's chest.

Weaver whirled his horse, leaped from his back and dashed to the fallen man. "Who are yuh? Who hired yuh?" he demanded.

THE drygulcher, stocky and brutal-faced, with a white scar running across his right cheek from temple to lower jaw, was going fast. His eyes were turning glassy.

"Thad Kelly," he choked, then his body twitched convulsively and became still.

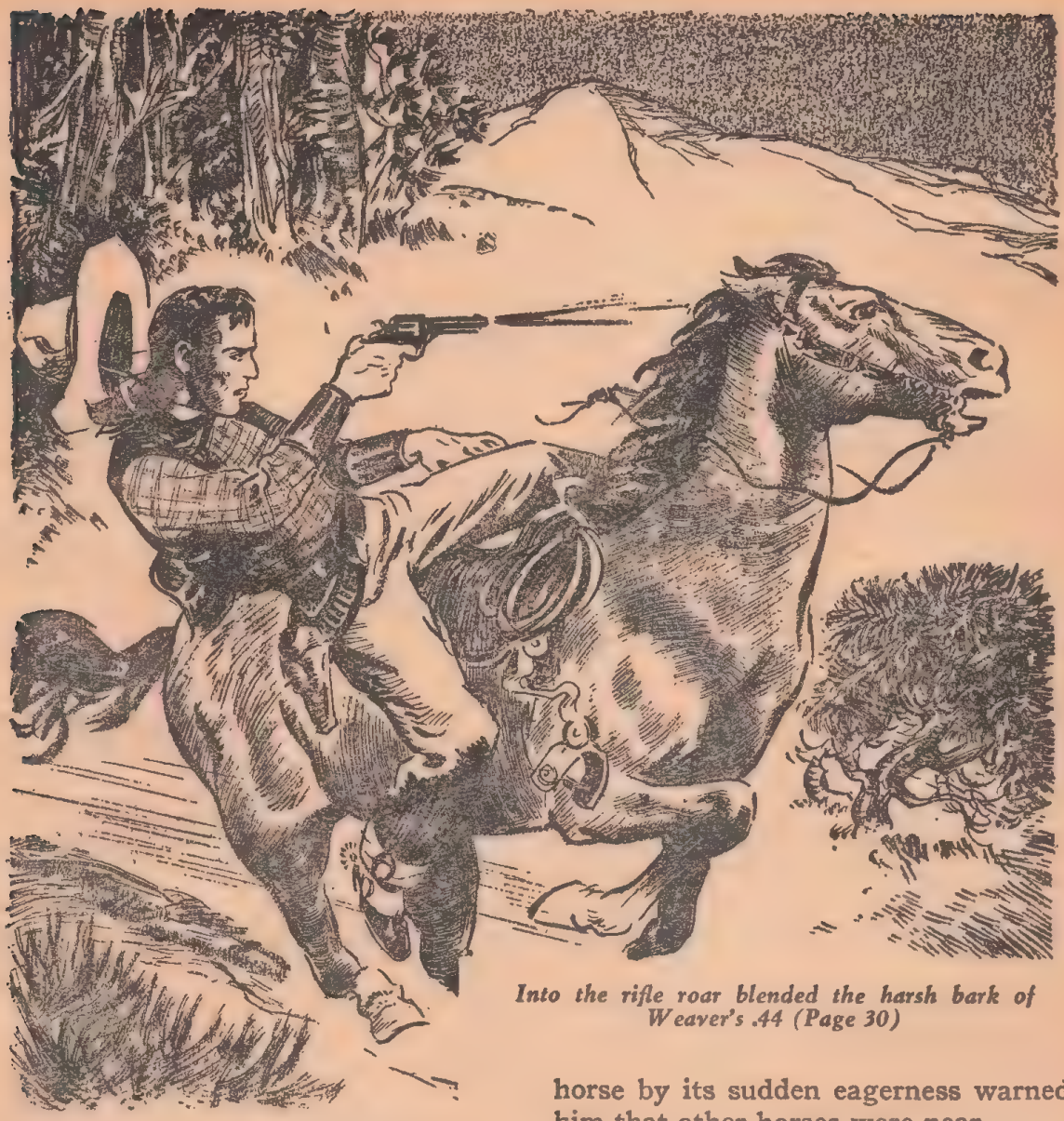
Bun Weaver forced himself to search the lifeless body. He had never before seen this fellow and he found no clue as to his identity. After a brief and fruitless search for the man's saddle horse, Bun appropriated the marksman's rifle—a .45-.70—swung to saddle and cut back into the mountains by way of a little-used ridge trail.

Darkness came on all too soon, yet the cowman pushed on, thankful for his knowledge of this rugged, forested land, which enabled him to avoid windfalls, inaccessible canyons and sheer rock cliffs which would have barred the progress of any rider unfamiliar with the vast and forbidding fastnesses of Silver Tip Range.

Deer feeding by starlight in open glades, bounded away into the sheltering timber at the horseman's approach. Three times he caught the gleam of yellowish cat-eyes from rocks and underbrush. Mountain lions, wild cats or lynxes. They would not attack a man. Anyway, he had no quarrel with them. His quarrel was with a human wolf, who must be exterminated.

Atop a knife-blade ridge, where the night wind chilled him to the bone, he drew rein, hearing clearly the bawling of cattle in the distance. These must be his stolen cattle, protesting against their confinement in a blind canyon. In all likelihood the thieves—unless they were raiding again tonight—would be camped near those cattle.

Pressing onward, slowly and cautiously now, Weaver soon found this



Into the rifle roar blended the harsh bark of Weaver's .44 (Page 30)

surmise correct. Thad Kelly and his gunmen were camped at a strategic point on the south rim of Cougar Canyon where they could command the trail which led up the canyon and prevent anyone from molesting their stolen herd.

The cattle were farther up country, in one of the many small side gulches leading off from the main one. The rustlers, with their saddle and pack horses, occupied a sort of natural rock fortress. No telltale campfire indicated their whereabouts and Weaver, coming in from behind them, might have ridden right in among them had not his horse by its sudden eagerness warned him that other horses were near.

Tying the animal in a jackpine thicket, the cowboy investigated on foot. Obviously Thad Kelly had expected no attack from this quarter. And Weaver soundly berated himself for not having taken time to gather a crew of fighting ranchers.

"If I had ten good men I could wipe 'em out," he told himself.

Slipping from rock to rock and tree to tree, he drew closer to the enemies' dark camp. Now he could see their horses, picketed among the rocks, grubbing the scanty grass. The low, indistinct hum of voices reached his ears. Snaking his way onward, he reached

a large boulder, peered around it and saw the dark shapes of men, some sprawled on rolled-out beds, some sitting cross-legged in a circle. Two other stood at the rim of the canyon, watching the trail by starlight.

"I'D GIVE a month's wages for a lungful o' smoke right now," Weaver heard a muttered complaint.

"Me, too," mumbled another. "But Thad's right. We don't want to tip off where we are by showin' a light."

"Hist! Somebody comin' up trail," called one of the sentries.

Instantly the men—Weaver had tallied ten—were galvanized to attention, snatching up their rifles. They waited for the orders of a huge, chunky fellow who had risen from a tarp-covered bed. That big-shouldered man must be the boss—Thad Kelly.

"How many?" the leader asked in a deep, low whisper.

"Only two," a lookout's low voice answered. "One's carryin' what looks like a white flag lifted above his head. Other one's jest a kid."

"Now what the heck?" mused Kelly.

"Throw a few shots at 'em, Thad?" someone inquired.

"Hell, no! Set tight, boys. I'll see what they look like." The big fellow walked stiffly over to the rim, and to his astonishment Weaver heard one rustler say:

"Thad's been agin killin' all the time. Mebbe them ranchers is ready to talk turkey, huh?"

"Pull up, you hombres!" boomed Kelly's heavy voice, and Weaver heard another voice borne upward in the still night air.

"We're ridin' under a flag of truce to talk business with Thad Kelly."

"I'm Kelly. Who're you?"

"Mace Malden. The boy with me is your nephew, Billy Kelly."

Bun Weaver almost shouted his amazement. "What the seven kinds of blue smoke?"

"My nephew?" yelled Kelly. "You tryin' to come a whizzer on me? Ride up here, you two. Want to look at yuh close."

"Jest a second, Kelly," called Mace Malden. "I'm under a flag of truce. Do I git to ride out with a whole hide after I tell yuh my business?"

"Shore. I fight fair. Climb the slope. Steeper'n hell, but a hoss kin make it easy."

Kelly spoke over his shoulder to his astonished men. "Light a fire. I want a good squint at these fellers. My nephew? Reckon I'll know whether he is or not."

Weaver didn't like the fire idea. He was too close for safety. However the rock would protect him unless someone stepped behind it.

A MATCH flamed. Shavings caught its fire. A burly ruffian piled on dry pitch branches and in a moment the small amphitheater among the boulders was aglow with dancing light. Weaver could see then that the Kelly men were about evenly divided between young and middle-aged, with two oldish fellows, gray at the temples. Nearly all were unshaven. A salty bunch, he decided; plenty bad medicine to monkey with. Thad Kelly, himself, was a roughhewn, bow-legged old warrior with grim, hard, deeply-furrowed face, ragged iron-gray hair straggling from under his battered black hat and a thousand fine lines about fierce dark eyes. The same tough old buzzard Weaver remembered.

Shod hoofs rang against rocks. Then, in single file, two riders popped up over the rim, advancing into a circle of firelight and armed men.

"Watch Malden, boys," ordered Thad Kelly. "Kid, step down where I kin look at yuh."

"Uncle Thad!" cried Billy, awe and admiration and hero worship in the ejaculation. "Dad always said yuh'd come back!"

CHAPTER V

Ambush Spiked

THAD KELLY peered closely at the boy.

"By Godfrey," he swore, "yuh shore are my brother's son. Where's yore dad? Yore ma? All yore folks? I plumb failed to locate 'em."

"Is that so?" Bun Weaver growled under his breath. "That girl knew yuh was back, yuh cow thief. That second letter of hers proved it."

Thad Kelly, hard-bitten old rascal, was hugging the boy and Billy's eyes were moist. Weaver scowled. Here was a knotty mess. That old reprobate, thief and killer! Weaver could not forget his murdered cowboy and the bushwhacker who'd tried to get him. And Billy Kelly's uncle, Jan's uncle, had hired the killer!

"Dad's dead, Uncle Thad," Billy was saying, "and the Longhorn ranchers say they paid their debt to him. But they didn't! I'm glad yuh're here to raise hell with 'em."

"I'm doin' it, ain't I?" Thad pushed the boy away from him. "Bill's gone, eh? What's this about a debt to him?"

"They gave him a note for fifty-two thousand dollars to pay for the cattle and hosses."

Kelly pulled off his disreputable hat, frowning. "I didn't know that," he said tightly. "Well, we'll collect it, Bill."

"Not likely, Kelly," Mace Malden sneered. "The debt's been paid once. And I'm here to tell yuh to draw in yore horns."

"Yeah?" asked Thad Kelly, instantly aggressive.

"Yeah?" iterated Mace sarcastically. "Yuh kinda like this kid, so I allow yuh'll like his sister even better. Janet Kelly, your niece, is at the Diamond H. Yuh're to turn loose all the cattle yuh've stole from Longhorn ranchers. Yuh're to deliver to us the men who murdered two or more of our men and—"

"Back up, hombre," Kelly barked. "We ain't murdered nobody."

Mace waved a hand impatiently. "Then you and the rest of yore outlaws are to make yoreselves damned scarce around these parts. It's a plumb easier way outa the trouble yuh've stirred up than yuh got any right to expect. But my father—"

"Seems jest like I hear old Martin Malden a-talkin'," Kelly said. "Yuh're shore a chip off the old block, Mace. You Maldens a-tellin' me what to do, huh? Well, by—"

"We're tellin' yuh!" snapped Mace Malden. "Yuh'll do jest what I've said, Thad Kelly, or Janet Kelly won't see tomorrow's sunrise."

Bun Weaver's whole body went cold. Hectic thoughts whirled through his mind.

"Uncle Thad," Billy Kelly said quickly, "it's true. Jan is at the Diamond H!"

"Uh-huh," said Mace triumphantly. "I brought the kid along to verify my word. What's yore answer, Kelly?"

Weaver heard Thad Kelly's breath rush out gustily.

"Young chip off the old block," he roared, "tell that ornery, two-faced schemin' cur of a dad of yores we Kellys never made war on women when we fought yore settlers, and the settlers never did neither. Tell Malden I'm callin' his bluff. He won't harm Janet! He won't dare. The other ranchers won't let him. That's my answer. The war goes on. When yuh're ready to talk turkey come back again under yore flag of truce. Now git!"

"Come on, Billy," ordered Mace Malden quietly.

"I'm not goin' with yuh," defied

Billy. "I'm goin' to fight you crooks, right with my Uncle Thad."

"All right," Mace said, undisturbed. "I kinda expected that. On with the war, Thad Kelly. Yuh'll regret it. The ranchers are bunched at Windy Hollow right now, ready to ride back into these mountains and wipe yuh out."

WEAVER saw the tall figure of Mace Malden vanishing over the rim on the back trail. Wasn't there something he, Bun Weaver, could do to change Kelly's answer to the Longhorn ranchers? Particularly to Diamond H Malden?

A bluff, Thad Kelly had declared. Weaver wasn't so sure of that. Old Diamond H was a stern, iron-willed man, a leader who stopped at nothing to gain his ends. When crossed he became a devil, implacable, merciless. Young Weaver had learned a good deal about Malden in the past twelve years —not all of it to the man's credit.

While the Tincup cowboy hesitated and tried to think of some expedient to change Kelly's mind, Mace Malden vanished. The drum of his horse's hoofs echoed along the canyon.

"Why in hell," Weaver gritted under his breath, "did the girl have to git mixed up in this? It's already knotty enough to drive a man loco . . . Aw, Malden won't harm her. Nobody will."

On the other side of his rock, Billy Kelly was saying:

"I'm shore glad yuh called their hand, Uncle Thad. 'Course they won't hurt Jan—or kill her."

"So the skunks promised to pay my brother and never did?" mused Thad Kelly. His bellowing voice raised, "I hate 'em more'n ever now. Damn 'em, threatenin' a woman! Boys, I said I drawed the line on killin'. But no more. Not after that play. We kin wipe out a bunch of 'em tonight. They're gathered at Windy Hollow, Mace said, and mighty soon they'll be ridin' up through Cougar Canyon to attack us. Git busy, boys. Le's ride. We'll line both sides the Canyon with riflemen, git them settlers in a trap and—"

The next minute the renegade crew were running to get their horses, while Bun Weaver thought grimly, "I ought to shoot Thad Kelly—even if it costs me my life. That'd stop this crazy war." But he could not shoot the boss of these rustlers. The man was Jan's uncle, and that changed everything.

Hugging the dark ground, he stole swiftly away. But the Kellyites were too bent upon hitting the trail to notice the lone fugitive slipping noiselessly away, even if they had heard a sound.

Weaver hit the saddle, and once again was glad he knew this mountainous section so well. He could get down the face of the range without making use of the Cougar Canyon trail.

This he did, barely in the nick of time. The Longhorn ranchers with their cowboys and ranch hands had left Windy Hollow and were filing into the mouth of Cougar Canyon when a wild-riding horseman dashed up from their right.

"Steady, fellers! Pull up! Bun Weaver speakin'."

"We're the ranchers, Bun," Sam McNulty's voice spoke up. "You ain't tryin' to hold us up, figgerin' we're the rustlers?"

"No. Men, yuh're headin' straight into an ambush. Not a man'd git out alive. Lope ahead, somebody. Quick! Stop the boys. Bring 'em back!"

SWIFTLY Bun told all he had learned about this, and a rider had spurred ahead to bring back all hands. They gathered around the Tincup cowboy, plying him with questions. But he interposed one of his own.

"Did Mace Malden tell yuh Thad Kelly called his hand?"

"Yes," clipped Leckenby. "Us ranchers 'lowed 'twas a good bluff. But I ain't surprised Thad Kelly called it. He'd realize us ranchers just naturally

couldn't do nothin' vicious to a girl."

"Yet the situation is plumb desperate," spoke up Dell Floyd. "If it hadn't been for Bun the whole bunch of us would be stoppin' rustler lead right now!"

"Neighbors," Weaver said soberly, "I gotta mention a damned odd thing about this deal. I heard one Kellyite say Thad had drawn the line on killin' and Thad hisself said they hadn't killed nobody. Yet—"

Grizzled Sam McNulty swore testily. "The Kellys are liars. Don't I rec'lect how twelve years ago they denied they shot my old father? They was hope of peace until they did that underhanded, sneakin' murder. . . . What I don't savvy is how come Miss Janet Kelly to put herself in a trap deliberate like. She and her kid brother show up at the Diamond H, a-knowin' that Thad Kelly was raisin' particular hell with us. 'Tain't reasonable nohow yuh figger it."

"But they didn't know a thing about Thad Kelly," Weaver declared stoutly. "I heard the hard-boiled old renegade and Billy talkin' and—"

"Wait a minute, Bun," cut in Leckenby. "All of us got letters sayin' Thad was back and goin' to collect by force. Same handwritin' as the first letters from Miss Kelly askin' us to settle the debt. Same signature. How yuh explain that?"

"Must be a joker in the deck," Weaver said flatly. "Didn't Mace Malden stay with you riders? I don't see him."

"Mace said we'd never have a better chance to spring a s'prise attack on them rustlers. Then he hit out for home, to bring out the Diamond H boys. All of 'em that's left on the ranch, anyhow. When we was there t'night Diamond H said his foreman and Flash and most of the cowpunchers had gone after a herd o' cattle he'd bought up north."

"This gabbin' ain't gittin' us no place," McNulty rumbled impatiently. "Reckon we kin manage without Malden's cowboys. His play to force Kelly to terms has flopped, and I figger we're all agreed this wolf and his thievin' crew have got to be cut down like coyotes. Plumb exterminated. How'll we go about it?"

"That's the talk!" whooped a cowpuncher, and others vociferously voiced similar sentiments.

"Well, I've drawn first blood for our side," commented Weaver. "I shot a bushwhacker who was shore out to git me."

WEAVER waved aside the bombardment of questions which followed this announcement.

"Give yuh the details later," he said. "Now listen. Some of yuh are mighty hot-headed, spoiling for a fight. But hold yore hosses. A gun battle means a lot of us'll go to our graves; more'll be crippled mebbe for life; women and children'll be left widows an orphans, with homes all busted up. Let that sink in, men. The reason I'm talkin' like this is I want yuh to sit tight for a day, or mebbe two. Give me a chance to see if I can't do what Malden's threat failed to do—persuade or force Thad Kelly to stop his damned war."

"What's yore plan?" countered Sam McNulty, bearded old settler and recognized leader when Diamond H was not present.

"I'm keepin' that under my hat. I'm askin' yuh to trust me blind—but I believe yuh will. Now I gotta be driftin'."

Although the men called to him to wait and to thresh the matter out fully, Bun Weaver turned his horse and headed as the crow flies for the Diamond H. With him rode stark fear that perhaps he had delayed too long. A girl was held captive on the Diamond H. A girl who had done strange things to the heart of the young Tincup rancher.

It mattered not that she was the

Thad Kelly

niece of the man who was at this moment Bun Weaver's bitterest enemy, nor that she was the daughter of a man who had hated all the cowmen of the Longhorn. For suddenly Bun Weaver realized that if anything happened to Janet Kelly that his own life would not be worth living. And he recognized the wild emotion for what it was—love.

He feared for her safety because there was no telling what that implacable, determined and cold-blooded man, Diamond H Malden, might do now that Thad Kelly had defied him. And Mace Malden would be as much of a problem.

Thinking of Mace Malden and his brother, Flash, Weaver felt cold chills on his back. The boys possessed all of their father's vices and none of his virtues. Both were known as young "hell-twisters," but that they were also cruel and cunning, crooked and greedy was not generally known. Bun Weaver knew, though.

Riding at top speed across the rough sage brush hills he presently was overtaking another horseman heading toward the Diamond H. Mace Malden, he thought. Suddenly a second rider hove into view, to the right of the one Weaver thought was Mace, traveling in the opposite direction. Immediately, Mace Malden swerved to head-off the oncoming rider, who plainly was trying to avoid the meeting.

"I'll see about this," Weaver gritted, and used a doubled rope on the sweat-streaked hips of his lagging mount.

CHAPTER VI

Escape from Diamond H

AFTER Jan Kelly had gone to her room, she heard strange goings and comings about the big Diamond H ranch-house and out in the yard. It seemed to the tense, impatient girl that the place would never quiet down. She flung herself on the comfortable bed in the darkness, not to sleep but for physical rest. For her mind there was no rest.

So many disturbing things had come to light today; things beyond her comprehension. But more disturbing than all the other astounding revelations was the news of Thad Kelly's return, and the certainty that her uncle was already waging war against the men of the Longhorn. That was stranger even than being told the debt had been paid, or the cropping up of that forged letter bearing her signature.

Jan was not one to sit idly by and let events take their course. Tonight she intended to do all in her power toward shaping them right. Accordingly, when at last the ranch seemed to have become silent as a grave, the girl buttoned up her doe-skin jacket, pulled her hat low on her dusky curls and tiptoed silently from her room.

Feeling her way along the dark corridor, she descended the rear stairs. The door leading to the outside was locked. Malden was making certain

she did not leave the house.

Creeping silently back she did not go to her room but went softly down the front staircase. She entered the living room—and froze in her tracks.

Someone was at Diamond H Malden's safe over in the far corner! Starlight shining through the windows dimly revealed his figure. The prowler was just closing the safe and rising to his feet. Whether he was Malden himself or a thief he must not see Jan Kelly. Quickly she slipped behind a big chair and crouched low, hoping whoever it was might not hear the wild thumping of her heart.

Soundlessly he was walking past her to the stairs. She craned her neck to look around the chair, seeing only the man's back, yet she knew him at once. It was Ormond Van Ormond!

Wondering about this mysterious man who appeared to be a tenderfoot swept over her afresh. Was he a thief? Should she rouse Malden and tell him what she had just seen?

No! Two of Malden's men — they must have been his men—had searched Van Ormond's room. Van Ormond was no worse than they. Besides, when he had told her about the letters and pronounced some of them forgeries, the man had seemed to be her friend.

"And how I need a friend!" Jan thought. "Even a—a safe-cracker. . . . Whatever he is, this Ormond Van Ormond is nobody's fool."

He had vanished at the head of the stairs, so Jan hastily tried the living room door. It was looked. So was the kitchen door. Angry, but refusing to be discouraged Jan returned to her own room, where she made sure the window was neither screened nor shuttered. Then as once again she heard movements in the house she waited more than half an hour before she tied bed blankets together, fastened the improvised rope to the bedstead and crawling through the window, lowered herself to the ground.

THREE minutes later she was inside the old log cabin her father had built. Not daring to light matches for fear Malden might have a guard circling the buildings, Jan felt her way to the mantel with the steer horns above it.

They were not difficult to pry loose, and the weathered strip of rawhide binding them together had rotted with age. It tore apart with a squeaking sound—loud to the ears of the tense-nerved girl—then she reached a slim hand up inside one horn. Nothing was there!

She shook the long horn. Nothing fell out of it. She laid it down, reached up inside the other as far as her hand could squeeze and her fingers closed on something that rustled—a folded slip of paper!

Only a second later her feeling of exultation changed to stark panic as from without heavy footsteps sounded on the hard earth. Two men were approaching the cabin.

Janet leaped for the door, slid through it and darted like a shadow around the nearest corner. Crouching there, she heard the footsteps draw nearer and then a voice:

"Damned odd the door's open," said Diamond H Malden.

"If anybody's beat us to it, we'll know who 'tis," growled the rancher's companion.

Jan started. Where had she heard that voice before? Such a familiar voice. She ventured a look. But the men had entered the old cabin. Matches flamed and Malden said quietly:

"Hah, the steer horns are pulled down and torn apart. Somebody's beat us to that note."

"We kin guess who, and of course yuh kin git—" the other man began.

Jan did not hear the rest. She was flying across the yard to the stable. She must get a horse and leave this ranch! She slipped the piece of paper into the side pocket of her riding skirt. So it

was *the original note!* Malden had just said so. Therefore the one Malden had shown was a forgery! If that could be proved Jan Kelly could yet collect the debt due her father.

Abruptly however she stopped thinking of that debt, for a voice rumbled across the yard:

"There she goes! As I thought, it's Jan. We got to—"

And at that moment Jan remembered the voice of the man with Diamond H. It was the voice of Frank Newhouse, the Kellys' hired man on their little ranch near Nugget. Could he be—

No time to puzzle about that now. She had reached the huge stable and abruptly her hopes of escape tobogganed. Bronc, the burly, coarse-featured cowpuncher she had met at the supper table, stood at the open door.

"Goin' somewhere, sister?"

The fellow's insolence stung Jan like a lash. Obviously she could not get a horse. But if she could only cross the intervening distance to the willows along Longhorn River she could hide in the dense brush.

Instantly she attempted to dodge past the cowpuncher. Bronc, however, was too quick for her. Darting after her, he threw his arms about Jan's body. Like some wild thing she fought, and as they struggled, they shifted places until Bronc was nearer the corner of the barn than Jan. Locked in his embrace, she saw a man appear behind the cowpuncher, as though by magic. The man's arm with something heavy at the end of it lifted high, plummeted downward.

BRONC collapsed in a heap against the dark wall. And Jan's rescuer was saying in a low, tense whisper:

"I got a horse for you. Led it out the back door. It's on this side."

He caught the girl's hand, pulled her around the corner. The ominous sound of boots pounding across the yard were drumming in Jane's ears—Malden and Newhouse running to the stable. But she was up in the saddle, and the man—Jan could see now that he was Van Ormond—was pressing the bridle reins into her hands and whispering:

"Fog clear through to Cragmont. You may be safe there. You won't be in Last Stand. Get the sheriff on the job. Good luck!"

As Jan spurred ahead at a dead run, she heard Malden's booming shout:

"Bronc! Bronc! Who's on that hoss? Where's that girl?" A pang shot through her at thought of what might happen to the man who'd made her escape possible. But Ormond Van Ormond had shown plenty of resourcefulness. Surely he'd be able to take care of himself. A tenderfoot, that mysterious fellow? Not on your life!

Flying along the road to Last Stand by the light of twinkling stars, Jan was soon aware that someone was hot on her trail. She had no gun; yet she was determined not to be taken back to the Diamond H—not when Malden wanted that original note so badly; not when Jan Kelly felt that the most imperative thing in the world right now was for her to find her Uncle Thad.

She had no intention of going to Cragmont as Van Ormond had suggested. She meant to find Cougar Canyon as the first step toward locating Thad Kelly.

The pursuing hoofbeats, growing steadily louder, were terrifying. Suddenly a plan to avoid her pursuers came to mind and, at the first stream the road crossed, Jan swung off her horse and led him in among the scrubby willows. She stood holding one hand on the animal's nostrils while a lone rider thundered along the road only a few rods distant and went on. When the sound of his horse had become faint, Jan mounted and cut across the sage brush hills for Cougar Canyon as nearly air line as she could direct her course when unfamiliar with the locale.

A new worry now rose in her mind.

Billy! He must not return to the Diamond H. Perhaps she would run into the boy and Mace Malden. But if she did Mace would force both of them to go back with him.

Suddenly a horseman hove in sight from over a low hill. He was spurring toward her fast, and on this open sagebrush land was no convenient grove or willow-lined stream affording cover to the lone girl.

She veered off at a tangent but the man instantly swerved his mount to intercept her.

Jan kicked her mount, lashed him with the ends of the bridle reins. The man was nearer, a superb rider on a splendid mount. She saw his eyes gleam in the starlight. Mace Malden!

Paley Jones

SHE won past him, but his horse was following hers. Its outthrust nose was abreast her mount's flank. She struck at the animal's head and missed. It leaped up alongside her and Mace Malden's teeth as well as his eyes flashed in the starlight as he caught her bridle and drew both horses to a halt.

"'Evenin', Miss Kelly. Lucky I ran across yuh."

"Not for me," stormed Jan, feeling the most forlorn, all-hope-gone sensation she had ever known. "Where's Billy?"

"Safe enough. And so'll you be, back at the Diamond H. Who the hell's that comin'?"

A second rider was hurtling across the sage and for a moment Jan held hope this might be someone to aid her. The hope died as swiftly as it had been born, for instantly she recognized the oncoming rider as the tall, slender cowboy she had ridden beside on the stage. Not since they had parted had she been able to get him out of her thoughts.

He pulled his panting, weary nag to a stop and sat motionless in his saddle, looking from the girl to Mace Malden and back again, wordlessly. After a prolonged stare young Malden broke the silence.

"So it's you, Bun Weaver? Yore hoss seems pretty much used up. Where yuh been?"

"It'll be more to the point if you tell me where you're going."

Mace Malden shrugged. "I reckon yuh jest got home from shippin'. Mebbe you ain't heard—"

"I've seen Sam McNulty and the other ranchers," Weaver said grimly. "So I reckon I've heard it all, Mace. Also—bringin' yuh right up to date on news—I was lucky enough to plug a drygulcher that was layin' for me near the Tincup. I've been to Thad Kelly's camp, too. But he didn't see me. You and Billy Kelly didn't, neither. Lastly, I found the ranchers in time to stop 'em from gittin' massacred in Cougar Canyon."

Weaver's remarks seemed to dumbfound Mace Malden. Bun Weaver swept off his big hat.

"Right glad to see yuh again, Miss Kelly," he said. "Looks 's if me and Mace had a little business to thresh out, now."

"Yeah?" growled Mace.

"Looks like Miss Kelly got away

from the Diamond H, Mace," said Weaver. "Looks like you figgered to take her back."

"Your're dead right, feller!" snapped Mace Malden. "Course yuh'll agree that's where she's to go?"

"But I don't agree. 'Twas a cowardly play your dad made, holding the girl as a hostage to try to club Thad Kelly down. You kin tell Diamond H so, from me. Now, ramble along home, Mace. Yuh're ridin' alone."

"Say, yuh think any dinky, one-hoss rancher kin tell the Maldens where to head in?" Mace flared hotly. "Diamond H is still boss of the Longhorn. Don't yuh forget it neither. My dad tried to make peace with Thad Kelly, usin' the means at hand to force Kelly to draw in his horns."

"And failed!" Weaver put in coldly. "As any such contemptible play should a failed."

"WELL, git this, Weaver!" snapped Mace Malden, "this girl's gotta keep on bein' a—a guest on Diamond H or we lose the only hold we got on this wild renegade, Thad Kelly. I can't imagine how she ever got off the ranch, but she's going back there with me! Try to stop me and yuh'll git Diamond H on your neck. Yuh can't buck the Maldens. I don't know why I'm arguin' with yuh, Weaver, 'less it's to try and pound some sense in yore bone-headed skull. This ain't no time for a split amongst the ranchers."

"I know that," retorted the Tincup cowpuncher. "But I'll buck Diamond H and you and Flash Malden and everybody else in this neck of the woods to see that Jan Kelly gits out of that wolfs' den safe and sound."

The girl sat frozen in her saddle, watching these two men facing each other like savages about to clash. Mace Malden suddenly released his hold on her bridle reins. His right hand darted to the Colt at his hip.

"Jist a second before yuh start any fireworks," flashed Weaver. "We don't see eye to eye, that's all. But I want yuh to tell Diamond H I have hopes of settlin' this ranch war without a fight."

"Yuh'll git a chance to tell it to Diamond H yoreself," rasped Mace, his face a storm cloud of fury. "I'm takin' you in as well as—" He tugged at his gun.

But the weapon never cleared leather. Things happened so swiftly Jan could not keep track of them. Bun Weaver seemed to lift his horse forward. At the same instant he left his saddle as though hurled from a catapult; left it to pounce full upon Mace Malden. A snorting, terrified horse whirling, rearing, plunging madly; two human figures locked together on its back.

Then the horse seemed to slide out from under them. They hit the ground hard. Yet they were on their feet instantly, slugging each other toe to toe. A silent, terrific battle. Both hatless, both panting for breath. Suddenly it came to the watching girl that now was her chance to race away. Yet something held her. It was a desire, wild and fierce, to see Bun Weaver win.

Weaver, dancing away from his adversary, had tripped over a clump of sage. He was down, with Mace Malden again reaching for his gun. And then Jan Kelly acted. Snatching the quirt from her saddle horn, she spurred her horse close to young Malden and brought the stinging lash down on his hand.

He jerked the hand upward, empty. Weaver was again on his feet and charging forward. His right fist socked to Malden's stomach, his left to the jaw. Mace Malden dropped in his tracks. Bending over him, Weaver stripped off his belt with holstered Colt.

"Yuh'll mebbe need this, li'l girl," he panted, and handed it up to Jan. "We'll leave him my useless livery

stable nag and I'll take his good hoss."

Jan said nothing. Her lips were tight. But her eyes were glowing. Bun Weaver had won the fight.

Yet was she any better off? What did he now intend to do? He was catching Mace Malden's frightened mount. He picked up his hat, took a rifle from the saddle on the animal he had been riding, then mounted. "Let's drift, Miss Jan," he said.

CHAPTER VII

To the Rescue

BUN WEAVER and Janet Kelly riding together were three hundred yards distant from the disgruntled Mace Malden before Jan spoke. "I don't know why you should help me to get off the Diamond H when — when we're enemies," she whispered, and then: "The idea was in my mind that if I could only see my Uncle Thad I could stop this—"

"So that was why yuh was headed toward Cougar Canyon!" ejaculated the cowboy. "The same thought was in my mind. But I wondered if yuh'd want to use yore influence—and it'd be a tellin' influence—to stop the crazy war."

"Oh, I do! It's terrible! I'm wild to do anything and everything I can to end it."

"Good!" the cowboy smiled as he gave her an admiring glance. "Even if we are enemies, we see eye to eye on one point at least."

"Then you'll help me find Thad Kelly?" she asked eagerly. "Where can I find him and how? Mace left the Diamond H to ride up Cougar Canyon with a flag of truce. He took Billy with him. But Billy didn't come back. If anything has happened to him—" she choked.

"No call to worry about him," Weaver assured. "He's with Thad Kelly. Yes, and he's shore found a hero in that hard-bitten old uncle of yores. The kid's jest a-rarin' to tangle with the Longhorn ranchers."

"Then I'm going to Uncle Thad, too," Janet said firmly.

Weaver shook his head. "The ranchers are still bunched near Windy Hollow at the entrance to Cougar Canyon," he told her. "They wouldn't let yuh git through to join forces with yore uncle any more'n Mace would. And Thad's rustler crew are guardin' the canyon. They'd shoot anybody comin' up it."

"Is it hopeless?" Impulsively Jan gripped the cowboy's arm. Somehow, since he had fought Mace Malden, she felt no fear of him. On the contrary she had confidence in him.

He gently covered her hand with his own. "Are yuh game for a tough trip through the mountains? If so, we'll take a trail I know and come upon Thad Kelly from the rear. Reckon he don't guess he's wide open for an attack from that quarter."

"I'm game for anything," she assured. "But you should not go with me."

"Try to keep me from it. Yuh never find your way without a guide, anyhow, Miss Weaver."

"I wish you'd call me Jan," she said. "Now is no time for formalities."

Weaver grinned. "I will—Jan—if you'll call me Bun."

"Bun," she said softly, and flushed to the roots of her fair hair.

Jan withdrew her hand. This was an unprecedented situation, riding by night with a man she had met only this morning—yesterday morning, to be exact, for it was now well on toward three a. m. Yet she felt no fear; rather thrilled to the experience.

There could be a romantic touch to it, too, if only Bun Weaver were not her enemy. It was a little romantic anyhow. And certainly far better than being a "guest" on the sinister Diamond H.

WEAVER was following the foot of Silver Tip Range which rose massive and sombre and forbidding as the two riders headed south-by-west, dropping down into deep, dark valleys and climbing out of them again to cross hills and level reaches before striking other gulches. Trying to fit together the pieces of a puzzle, Jan rode in silence. As they came to the crest of a hill, Weaver halted.

"The Tincup, my li'l ranch, is down there," he said, pointing down into the valley. "We'd git a meal, only the grub burned with the cabin. Guess you had supper, Jan. I've had nothin' since breakfast yesterday."

"Oh, you must be starved!"

"It's no matter. We turn up along this ridge north of Crazy Creek. . . . Jan, I wouldn't a thought Malden would let you git off the Diamond H. How'd yuh manage it?"

Jan quickly decided to say nothing about the promissory note. If Weaver knew she had the original, wouldn't he try to get it? She feared so, in spite of trusting him. All these ranchers seemed to have been working together to swindle the Kellys. Or were they?

"I slipped out of a second story window and got a horse at the stable and rode away," she answered lightly.

Weaver shook his head. "No go, li'l lady. It wasn't as easy as that. . . . Say, that tenderfoot that was lookin' for his brother. Did he go with you and Billy to the Diamond H?"

"Yes. His name's Ormond Van Ormond and he's no tenderfoot. He's a —I don't know what. I'd call him a man of mystery."

Jan broke off, confused. Perhaps she should not have said so much. She must not place Van Ormond in danger. Not after what he had done for her.

"No greenhorn, huh?" Weaver whistled softly. "Yuh got well acquainted with him then?"

"No. But he—well, he and I were examining some of the letters, those I actually did write and those you ranchers received later bearing my signature and the same postmark, which said Thad Kelly was back to collect by force. . . . Bun Weaver, I did not write those letters. I want you to

Mace Malden

believe that. Nor did I have the slightest idea Thad Kelly had returned until I heard of it at the Diamond H. Van Ormond said those last letters were forgeries."

"Since I cooled off and got to reasonin' things out, I decided the same thing, Jan," Weaver said soberly.

"And you still insist that the debt was paid?"

"It was, Jan, and to Bill Kelly himself. Yore father stayed with Malden at the Diamond H. All us other ranchers—two of the original eight are now gone—met him there, paid our portions of the total amount over to him. He

was a crippled, white-haired old man who looked just as I expected Bill Kelly to look."

Jan shook her head. "Only one answer to that, Bun. The man must have been an impostor." Eagerly she told the slender rider how it was impossible for Bill Kelly to have been in the Longhorn country two years ago, or at any time since he had been driven out.

SLOWLY Bun Weaver shook his head.

"Don't seem like anybody coulda palmed hisself off as Bill Kelly on the old timers. Malden, Leckenby, McNulty, Floyd, for instance. They all were shore 'twas Kelly hisself."

"Don't you believe me, Bun?" How the girl wanted him to believe in her and to trust her! This seemed tremendously important.

"Yes, I believe yuh, Jan," he said promptly. "Yuh're too sweet and good to lie." He put on his hat, kicking his horse to a faster gait up the steep ridge trail. "Somethin' skunk here. We got a mystery to unravel. Who was this faker? Who got the money? A wad of money."

"I've no idea," Jan said. "But I do know that the note Malden has which is marked 'Paid,' is a forgery, too."

"How kin yuh know that? The man who said he was Bill Kelly presented that note. . . . Humnm! The dust cloud thickens. I see it now. Yuh know it's a forgery because of course yuh've got the original note."

Jan smiled. Yes, she had the original. But what good was it going to do her?

"Li'l girl," Bun Weaver said, his jaw hard, "we've got a real job on our hands. First, to stop this damn fool war. Next, to find the clever jasper who got that money under false pretenses and force him to cough up. After these simple chores are done will there still be a feud?"

"Oh, I hope not. I hope not!" Jan's voice was tense and earnest, her blue eyes brooding.

As the trail narrowed, forcing the riders to single file the girl dropped back. Weaver's puffing horse led the way over rocks and fallen timber, as they skirted the base of cliffs, the edges of yawning chasms where a misstep meant a plung to sudden death.

Yet Jan scarcely noticed these hair-raising spots. So many perplexing things to mull over. Where did Frank Newhouse fit into this puzzle? He must have learned from Mrs. Kelly the hiding place of the original note, and had ridden to Diamond H Malden with his information! This was clear to Jan now. But he had not reached Malden in time to beat her to the note!

She felt in her pocket to see that the scrap of paper was safe. Her hand came away empty. Panic stricken, she reined in her horse. What had become of that precious slip of yellowed paper?

Only two men had been close to her since she had obtained the note—Maden's cowhand, Bronc, who had grappled with her, and Ormond Van Ormond, the man of mystery who had picked her up bodily and placed her astride a horse.

Jan Kelly saw her hope of collecting legitimately a just debt from the Longhorn ranchers flicker out as abruptly as dies the flame of a match when dipped in water. For without the original note she had no proof.

Weaver had lifted his bridle hand and turned his head: "Droppin' kinda far behind, ain't yuh? Want me to wait?"

Spurring up alongside the tall rider, Jan summoned all her courage to make her voice sound brave and assured.

"Perhaps this'll please you, Bun," she said tightly. "I—I've lost the original note."

"Yuh had it when yuh got to the Diamond H?" Weaver's eyes gleamed strangely in the half light. "You think it was stole while yuh was there?"

"Oh, but I didn't have it at first. I

might as well tell you all about it now, Bun. You see—"

CHAPTER VIII

Barriers Down

RIDING forward once again along the top of Silver Tip Range, Bun Weaver learned how Bill Kelly had hidden the slip of paper and never mentioned it to his family until he was sure he was going to die; how Jan had found the note and had almost been caught by Malden and Frank Newhouse; how Ormond Van Ormond had knocked Bronc cold and aided the girl to escape.

As she explained Jan saw young Weaver's rugged face tighten and harden.

"Tell me all you know about this Newhouse jasper," he said, and when she had the cowboys teeth clicked savagely. "We're safe in burnin' the snake-in-the-grass brand on that wall-oper, and I think—" He broke off.

"What, Bun? You look — that expression on your face—as if something had hit you harder than I've been hit, and I've certainly been knocked down and tramped on plenty yesterday and today."

"So yuh have, and I'm sorry. But mebbe yuh know how a cowpuncher feels when a plumb gentle pony he trusts unexpectedly comes undone and leaves him holdin' down a sagebrush forty miles from no place. That's the way I feel now. Diamond H Malden was out to git that original note; Newhouse had tipped him off where to find it. What's the answer?

"I may be jumpin' to conclusions, but the thing seems as plain to me now as the Diamond H brand. Malden has known all along that the note he has is a forgery. Newhouse has been keeping tabs on you Kellys—and reportin' to his boss, Diamond H Malden! Unknown to any of the rest of us ranchers."

"Unknown to you, Bun," Jan said decisively, but perhaps not to others besides Malden. You mentioned that two of the original eight settlers are no longer on the Longhorn. I wrote to eight men. None of my letters were returned. Who are those two? Where did they go? And, what is more to the point, did they make any arrangements about paying their share of the debt?"

"Glad yuh brought that up," said the cowboy, reining his horse around a big fallen pine. "After we'd won the Longhorn my father told me Bill Kelly had said there'd be no trouble and that we were welcome to stay. Then lightning struck out of a clear sky. Dad McNulty —Sam's old dad—was found murdered in cold blood."

Jan opened her lips and closed them. She'd heard the Kelly side of this. She didn't believe her father or her uncle or any of the Kelly cowboys guilty of that deed. But she would not argue with young Weaver just now.

"That hellish act," he was going on, "set the Longhorn on fire. I hold that our side was justified and in the right. But enough of that. After 'twas all over, things wasn't so easy for us, even though Texas cows furnished us a livin' and a bit more."

"Those Diamond H cows made the Longhorn and all you ranchers rich!" Jan exclaimed resentfully.

"BUT there were hardships and privations," Weaver insisted. Smiling at her he added, "anyhow, I like your spirit and fire. . . . Well, George Glover was the first that coudn't stand the life. Within a couple years he sold out to Malden, and left with jest a little money, because Mal-

den took on Glover's part of the debt to Bill Kelly.

"I've heard Glover wanted to welsh, but Malden woudn't stand for it, which is to Malden's credit. Anyhow, the whole idea of payin' Bill Kelly for the stock was Diamond H Malden's and he's always kept right on the rest of us of our obligation.

"I think George Glover and his family went back East. The rest stuck until three years ago when Jack Deane's wife died suddenly. Deane was all broke up, said he was goin' back to his old home."

"And did Malden accommodate him also by buying his outfit and assuming his obligation to my father?" Jan asked quickly.

"Shore. Paid a stiff price, too. However—" Weaver tipped his white hat down over his thoughtful eyes and rumpled his back hair—"poor old Jack Deane didn't git home. Some dirty thief we failed to track down shot Deane and robbed him."

"How awful!" cried the girl. "So Malden really owes us Kellys a great deal more money than any other rancher does?"

"Does he! I mean, did he, for it's been paid, remember. Diamond H took the lion's share of the Texas cows in the first place, fifteen hundred head. The other seven of us got five hundred each. The Kelly hosses was more evenly divided. All of us needed saddle ponies right bad. I haven't figgered it out, but what Malden owes—I mean owed—yuh, Jan, is quite a wad."

JAN lifted her eyes to the rosy light of dawn which was just touching the hilltops.

"And that seems quite significant to me," she said, low and thoughtful. "Bun, the man who impersonated my father stayed at the Diamond H. You paid. Others paid. But did Malden pay?"

Diamond H. Malden

Weaver stared at her, and the fine lines about his eyes stood out sharply etched; the deep brown eyes were suddenly as bleak and cold as the snow on a distant peak.

"We s'pose he did. Yet that same thought was in my own mind. . . . Jan, we're on the track of a swindle that—excuse me—smells of skunk. For quite a while I've suspected Diamond H and his two sidewinder sons of bein' two-faced. But never till now have I had reason to think our big man, our high-minded and noble leader, might be a damned thief!"

Weaver lapsed into a brooding silence which Jan respected. She too, had chaotic, troubled thoughts. She and her mother and father, the smaller children and Billy had all trusted Frank Newhouse; had thought him simple, easy-going, square. Now there was little doubt whatever but that Newhouse had sold the Kellys down the river.

The light was strengthening across the farther ranges, those gigantic folds in Mother Earth which stretched endlessly away to eastward and northward, bringing into sharp relief the higher, snowy peaks.

THE clear, cold air of the high, rough country cut through Jan's light jacket, stung her cheeks, numbed her fingers. A flock of grouse whirred out of a nearby cluster of jackpines and winged away. Bun Weaver whipped out his Colt, only to holster it again abruptly.

"I'm hungry as a lame and toothless lone wolf," he said half apologetically. "But the sound of a shot might upset our plans, pardner. . . . Almost there. We should be able to see Thad Kelly's camp from this next ridge. . . . I coulda led my rancher friends in a surprise attack from this side on yore renegade uncle."

"But you didn't, Bun. . . . Because you want to stop this awful war as much as I do."

"As much as you do, Jan. We'll leave our hosses here; take a look-see from a-top the ridge."

Only a minute later, from the cover of pines, Jan saw saddled horses, a camp fire, a half-dozen men getting breakfast in the distance, on the south side of Cougar Canyon. Her eyes sparkled with excitement. The camp of the uncle she had not seen for twelve long years!

"Not all of 'em there," said Weaver. "Some still guardin' the canyon lower down, I s'pose . . . Li'l girl, you kin follow right along that wide swale and ride right up to the camp."

"Couldn't you go with me, Bun? I feel sort of shaky — I expect they're pretty rough men."

"Yore uncle and Billy are there," Weaver said reassuringly. "'Twill be best if I don't show myself. Thad Kelly's plenty hard and he's out for revenge. But I'll be watchin'. Don't mention me to 'em, though."

They went back to their saddle horses. Jan held out her hand.

"I wish you could have some hot breakfast, Bun. Good-by for now. It's been—"

She stopped. Her eyes were meeting his and in their depths she read something that tingled her nerves, made her heart beat faster as a flush mantled her smooth cheeks. In spite of all the mental worry, this night ride with the brown-eyed, tanned-faced, lean cowman had been the most glorious adventure of Janet Kelly's life. And within her an emotion heretofore unknown had stirred to flaming life.

He had taken her soft hand and was standing silent, just looking at her face and then suddenly—Jan never knew how it happened—the man's arms had closed hungrily around her and her lips felt his fierce kiss. Nor were her own lips unwilling. In delirious ecstasy she clung to him, all problems erased, forgotten in the realization that this man whom she'd known less than twenty-four hours possessed that nameless something which stirred her to the depths. Which caught her up and out of herself in an emotion wild and ungoverned.

For a never-to-be-forgotten minute Janet Kelly, obeying the dictates of her heart, let herself be swept away by love. But sanity and cold logic returned with appalling force.

SHE struggled free, face flushed, eyes hot and flashing.

"We're mad," she gasped. "Crazy! I'm a Kelly and you're—"

"The man who loves yuh," said Bun Weaver. "And love smashes through all barriers. Jan darling, I couldn't no more help kissin' yuh than I kin help tellin' yuh now I love yuh and always will no matter what—"

"Stop! Our fathers fought. You, as a boy, fought my father. The Kellys and the ranchers are again at war, and I should not have let you do what you did, Bun. Because—because there can be no future together for you and me. Don't touch me again—please." Jan sprang lightly to her saddle. "Good-by."

The man stood motionless. All the

lines of his dark face had softened to match the warm glow in his eyes.

"It's *adios* not good-by, li'l girl. No matter what breaks now we kin never again be enemies. On opposite sides, for the time being, but afterwards—"

She was riding up the slope and did not halt or look back. Riding up the slope with a strange, new thrilling song in her heart and wild turmoil in her mind. Everything in her world was at sixes and sevens and cross-wise except that a man loved her; a strong, virile, masterful man who had declared "Love smashes through all barriers!"

CHAPTER IX

Thunder of Hoofs and of Rifles

CLIMBING the ridge and crouching in the timber a-top it, Bun Weaver watched the girl riding toward Thad Kelly's camp. The cowboy's eyes picked out a route where, by circling and keeping to the cover of the pines, he might get fairly close to the camp. He waited where he was for a little while longer, watching how men on the rim above Cougar Canyon immediately caught sight of Jan Kelly. Instantly four swung to saddles, loping to meet her. One was her brother; one, her uncle.

Young Billy fairly hurled himself upon his sister and hugged her fiercely. That shaggy old renegade, Thad Kelly, kissed the girl tenderly.

"I'm afraid she was right," the watching young cowman thought bitterly. "No future together for us. To yonder tough old scoundrel I'm no better than a rattlesnake—and I shore don't love him either. Can't see how I can ever meet him halfway. Discounting all that happened twelve years ago, that man has burned my ranch, stole my cattle and murdered my hired man."

His lean, weathered face was bleak and stony.

As Weaver saw Jan riding back to camp with the men he got his horse, circled far over to the left, and something like an hour later, with the morning sun smiling down on all this vast, rugged mountain world, he was stealing on foot toward his enemies. This time he was west of their camp, and near to the rim of Cougar Canyon. But to his dismay he dared not venture close enough to hear an ordinary conversation.

Breakfast was over, the rustlers packing up to move. They had twelve extra horses—Tincup and Wineglass horses! But only seven men, including Billy Kelly were present. Where were the others? Looking across the canyon, fully a half mile wide at this point, Weaver could see that the stolen cattle, his own and McNulty's Wineglass herd, were still in the narrow defile on the farther side of the small basin. No riders in sight there.

Lying flat on the earth and peering through the screen of a small bush which had rooted itself precariously on a rock, Weaver watched the Kelly crew. One man obviously had been commissioned to take Jan somewhere and the girl was remonstrating with her lame, bow-legged, knotty old bear of an uncle.

She was more than remonstrating. She was pleading with him. But he was shaking his shaggy head stubbornly, his seamed, harsh face uncompromising. Suddenly rage lifted his voice loud enough for Weaver to catch his words.

"Yuh're jest a child and don't realize what yuh're askin'. Call this war off? Never! Never 'till that whole scurvy outfit has paid through their noses. Never till we've run every damned one

of 'em off the Longhorn!. . . Take her away, Tex Jarvis. Take her clear home to her mother in Nugget."

"So she had failed," growled Weaver. He glared at Thad Kelly. "What makes the old grizzly so damn bitter? He's loco to think he kin win. . . . Billy, too, seems to be backin' his uncle. Well, I guess Nugget is the safest place for Jan if all hell's to pop."

THE man called Tex, chunky, sandy of complexion, and at least forty years old, was riding away with Jan. The girl held her head high. Her face was pale and drawn, but her eyes were bright and tearless. Weaver's heart went out to her. She had done the best she could to sway Thad Kelly; merciless, implacable warrior. That she had failed meant eventual extermination of one side or the other. Weaver could see nothing else.

The rustlers had broken camp and, leading three packed horses as well as all the extras, were riding slowly along the south rim of the canyon, Thad and young Billy riding side by side.

"Probably they've decided this place ain't safe for 'em as they'd believed," thought Weaver. "They can't be intendin' to head out to the Longhorn to raise more hell today. Anyhow, they didn't take the cattle with 'em, which gives me a chance to—"

Nodding his head grimly when the Kellyites had vanished in the timber, fifteen minutes later he came out of hiding and visited the late camp of the rustlers seeking scraps of food.

"Here, you fellers," he expostulated with three camp robbers, those grey-white birds which are always attracted to any camp in wooded, mountainous country, "whack up! Never imagined I'd git to battlin' with such as you for my grub. But hunger does funny things to a feller."

He found several broken biscuits and a good-sized piece of venison steak. Devouring this food, he went back to get his horse—or rather to Mace Malden's splendid black mount. Only a few minutes later, Bun Weaver had slipped down the steep trail up which Billy Kelly and Mace Malden had ridden last night, into the wide, basinlike area of Cougar Canyon.

Rapidly he crossed to the narrow gulch where his Tincut cattle and the Wineglass herd were imprisoned. Crowding against the fence which Kelly's crew had put across the lower end of this gash in the hills were over seven hundred cattle.

Half expecting that he might be challenged by a bullet from some well hidden guard, Weaver ripped a hole in the fence, forced his horse up through the densely packed cattle until he got behind them, and with swinging rope began whooping the stragglers out of the pocket. The greater portion of the herd needed no urging. By the time the cowboy again passed through the fence, the leaders were five hundred yards down the canyon, heading for home at a sharp trot, all the others stringing along behind them.

Joyfully, Weaver whipped up the laggards, mostly calves.

"Don't know what Thad figgered to do with these dogies after he had stole 'em," he muttered. "But I do know I'm saving my little herd and McNulty's for the time bein'. And this"—exultantly—"is going to make Kelly paw the air plenty. . . . Hike along, dogies! Git!"

They'd crossed the open area unmolested. Ahead lay the narrow canyon, a stream running down it and to the right and left almost perpendicular rock walls. Using his rope as a whip and riding like mad, he managed to send the herd into a lumbering gallop as it reached the narrow defile.

DOWN it they poured like a flood. Bawling; thunder of hoofs on rocky ground; dust, choking dust which half hid the man pressing the

cattle onward. Then he himself was in the narrow canyon, as yet unchalleged.

But suddenly from the steep slope at his right came a spurt of fire, followed by the staccato crack of a rifle. Past Bun Weaver's face hummed a singing bullet. At the same moment a second rifle opened up from his left. *Wham!*

Then abruptly two more rifles farther down the narrow canyon began to speak, one on either side. A bullet-necked cow let out a frightened bellow; another dropped as if hit by lightning; and all at once Weaver's horse quivered in every muscle, lunged high and crashed downward, turning end over end.

Thad Kelly and his renegades were sweeping toward the hired killers *(Page 98)*

Crack! Wham! How those guns were roaring. Screaming lead hailed about the man and his horse, striking rocks and ricocheting away with spiteful *woosings*.

Ducking low on his horse's neck, the cowpuncher lashed the animal in among the running cattle. The dust cloud protected him from the marksmanship of those riflemen. Then he had left them behind! He'd get out of this death trap yet!

As Weaver leaped clear he had a dim glimpse of running cattle at his right, his left and ahead of him. He would try to land upon a cow's back. But somehow the cow wasn't there as he sailed forward, and he could not avoid the big rock which rushed up to meet him. Sudden darkness enveloped him, blotting out sight and sound and feeling. . . .

When at last the Tincup cowman re-

gained consciousness he found himself lying on a tarp-covered bed on the ground. His head was splitting, his entire body from head to heels felt as if he had been brutally pounded. Sunlight pouring into his face and eyes almost blinded him. Where the dickens was he?

Slowly recollection returned: His horse running through a fog of dust behind a stampeded herd; rifles barking spitefully; the whistling of bullets; and then his mount going down. Darkness, oblivion, until this moment of awakening.

In the quiet air the smell of wood smoke hung heavy. He smelled boiling coffee and something else cooking. Men were moving about a tiny fire yonder and, turning his head he saw young Billy Kelly sitting beside his hard-featured uncle on a small rock, watching him.

The camp was in a small open area surrounded by timber. But how had Bun Weaver come to be there? And why had not those riflemen finished the job of killing him?

"He's come to, Uncle Thad," said Billy. "Kin I give him a cup of water now?"

"Uh-huh. Yuh say yuh're shore this dare-devil idjut who thunk he could take a herd o' cattle away from us single-handed is Bun Weaver?"

"Course. Didn't I tell yuh I seen him yesterday on the stage, and Jan—well, 'spite of him bein' one of the Longhorn ranchers, she thought he was pretty fine. I could tell that."

"What the hell?" growled Thad Kelly. "Women is always gummin' things up, son. When they git an idea they like somebody they ain't got no sense, hardly. Shore glad Jan's safe outa this deal. . . . I'll prop up this jasper while yuh give him a drink of water."

WEAVER tried desperately to sit erect and failed. His pounded muscles felt like water. Thad Kelly placed his horny hands under the cowboy's shoulders and raised his body while Billy held a tin cup to Weaver's lips.

"You're bunged up plenty, Mr. Weaver," said the boy. "And Muggs and Smitty wasn't careful how they throwed yuh on a hoss to bring yuh here. . . . We all heard the cattle runnin'. 'Twas like thunder. Then the shootin' started. Mebbe yuh know four of our boys was whangin 'away at yuh. Muggs says he jest plumb can't see why yuh didn't stop sixteen lead slugs."

Weaver swallowed the cold water greedily. "More," he requested. "Or some coffee."

"Git him coffee, son," directed Thad Kelly. "Biscuits and meat, too. I allus feed my prisoners 'fore I hang 'em."

Billy had started toward the fire. Abruptly he turned. "Uncle Thad, you ain't goin' to—"

"Hi, don't you go soft on me like yore sister. Yuh bet yore boots we're stringin' up this damn Longhorn squatter."

Billy swallowed hard and went on to the fire.

"Weaver," Thad Kelly went on in a hard voice, "mebbe it'll please yuh to know yuh plumb succeeded in takin' them cattle away from me. My boys wasn't set to stop no stampede. The dogies poured on outa the canyon and are back on Longhorn range, and me a-figgerin' to sell 'em to a buyer I been dickerin' with. Once he got 'em, that crooked buyer'd take his own chances on gittin' 'em outa these mountains."

"A buyer?" said Weaver quietly, flexing the muscles of his arms and rubbing his sore and woozy head. "I wondered how the blazes yuh thought yuh could git away with our cattle and hosses. Yore buyer'd shore kinda have his work cut out for him."

"Reckon so. But the jigger knowed this country; is plumb smart, too. I

knew him in the pen in Texas. He was let out long before I was, but he'd told me where a letter'd find him. I wrote him and got an answer. He shoulda showed up last night, comin' in across the range from the east with a bunch of hands. But he never did show up."

"The pen in Texas?" Weaver said wonderingly. "For a long time after that other hell-raisin' on the Longhorn 'twas said yuh'd come back, Thad Kelly. But twelve years have gone and we'd forgot yuh. Now yuh say—"

"The pen," grated Thad harshly and his dark eyes grew jet black. "That's where I've been. Mebbe yuh figger I'm a twisted, stubborn and damned bitter hombre. Which I am. Proddy, too. Mebbe you'd feel the same if yuh'd served ten years in that hell hole behind them rock walls—for somethin' yuh never done."

Billy returned with a plate of food and a cup of scalding coffee which he placed beside Weaver. Then he sat down on the bed and looked at his scowling uncle.

"Tell this Longhorn range-and-cow thief about it, Uncle Thad," he begged.

"I aim to."

CHAPTER X

Thad Kelly's Story

HIS face glowering, the knotty old Texan sat down facing the Tincup rancher. In the background, nearer the fire, half a dozen of the man's hard-bitten followers were eating their nood-day meal. That, and the fact that the sun was now directly overhead told Weaver he had been unconscious for several hours. Lucky for him that he was still alive. But he would not be for long; not with Kelly's announced intention to string him up.

"I've jest got to talk him outa that idea," thought Bun. "And git back my strength fast as possible, too."

Ravenously he fell upon the hot biscuits, venison steak and coffee, and despite his aching head never had food tasted quite so delicious.

Thad Kelly, the burning light in his eyes growing more pronounced, was talking.

"Even if yuh was pretty young twelve years ago, Weaver, I don't figger this'll be no news to yuh. But mebbe yuh never got the thing plumb straight. After the final showdown, Bill Kelly and his family was prisoners. Every last one of our cowpunchers was done for and I'da been killed too, only bad wounded as I was —shot three places in the body and my right leg busted—I managed to stay a-top a hoss and git into these same mountains we're in now.

"I allowed, o' course, that my brother Bill was a goner. Yet I figgered Martha and the kids would be took care of, or sent outa the country safe enough. I was shore in a bad fix my ownself, what with layin' low and tryin' to keep alive, all by my lonesome. But it takes a heap of lead to kill one of our breed.

"I cleaned my wounds and splinted my leg myself, lived on meat and water. Plenty of game those days, jest as thick as flies 'round yon camp fire. Trouble was, I was scairt to use my rifle or Colt to git my meat. Rigged me up a bow and arrow, got pretty good with it on small animals like grouse and rabbits, and I made out.

"Kinda lost track of time, but 'fore long I was ridin' toward Texas, mighty, mighty slow. Well, I got into Texas all right—but I didn't git to my friends!

"Nope. And why not? Because you

Longhorn skunks had somehow or other smelt out my trail. Though why the billy-hell the man yuh sicced on me didn't jest up and drygulch me and be done with it I've never yet been able to figger out."

Bun was staring open-mouthed at the grizzled old-timer.

"Yuh're plumb wrong, Kelly," he said. "None of us ever knew for shore what became of you. 'Twas said yuh'd headed back to Texas, but—"

"I KNOW what I'm talkin' about, Weaver!" Thad Kelly snarled angrily. "And 'twas jest like I'm a-sayin'! Down in the Texas cattle country I'd camped for the night at a deserted cabin where there was corrals, which same was empty when I bedded down. Bein' plumb wore out I slept mighty sound. Jest at crack of day, four fellers with guns woke me up—told me I was a killer and a hoss thief.

"As proof of that, the corrals was full of T X hosses—a cavvy belongin' to the T X oufit. I was plumb flabbergasted when I was accused of shootin' the night wrangler and drivin' off this cavvy durin' the night. I hadn't, but, by gravy! them fellers proved 'twas my gun that had killed the hoss wrangler. Also my hoss had been rid from the cabin where I was camped over to where the wrangler was nighthawkin' this T X cavvy.

"They shore had me dead to rights. Feller name of Paley Jones was pressin' the case agin me. Seemed like he was a newcomer that had been with the T X only a few weeks. Paley Jones claimed he never had seen me 'fore. But he had. I figger he thought changin' his name would keep me from recognizin' him. That rattlesnake had been in the war on the Longhorn. He was one of Martin Malden's men."

"One of Malden's men?" cried Bun Weaver. "Yuh shore of that?"

"As shore as I am that the sun's shinin' this pretty fall day. Yet this vinagaroon claimed he'd never been on the Longhorn, nor even in this state. Howsomever, the whole thing was plain to me as a fresh brand on a short-haired yearlin'—is now. Boss Malden and the rest of you Longhorn fellers, usin' Paley Jones to do the dirty work, was seein' to it that I'd be put where I couldn't do no damage for the rest of my life.

"Naturally, I figgered them Texas cowmen'd hang me since they was shore I was guilty. But they didn't. They let the case to come to trial and all that saved Thad Kelly from the noose was that they'd been no eye witnesses. They gave me life at hard labor in the Big Rock House.

"You're too young, Weaver, to ha' suffered much. But mebbe yuh kin kinda git jest a little idea of what a a cowman, a feller who'd been used to the open range and its free life, suffered in that damned dark, hellish smellin' prison. Right often I wished I'd die, but somethin' kept me alive—thirst for revenge.

"I jest lived for that, prayin for a day when I'd make Malden and all you snakes pay through yore noses. Hopin' mebbe I could git that sentence reduced I tried to be a model prisoner. It shore helped. Anyhow, more'n six months ago I was pardoned by the governor hisself and turned loose."

Kelly was silent a moment, frowning thoughtfully. "They's still somethin' about that I can't figger," he mused. "No way, shape or form. Some powerful outside influence worked to git me that pardon. Can't imagine who 'twas. Such friends as I had left in Texas didn't even know I was in jail 'till I got out and visited 'em."

" 'Some powerful outside influence'," Bun Weaver repeated, and shook his head, as greatly puzzled by this statement as he had been astonished to learn that a Malden man had engineered the framing of Thad Kelly. Thad Kelly's whole story was amazing.

IF IT were true—and somehow Weaver could not help believing it was—why, as Kelly himself had mentioned it, if Malden and the other ranchers of the Longhorn had had the tough old ranger trailed to Texas, had not Kelly been summarily drygulched? That would certainly have kept him from raising any more trouble for the Longhorn ranchers.

Thad Kelly had lapsed into a brooding silence for a few minutes, but was speaking again.

"If I coulda seen the governor I mighta found out who pulled the wires for me. Didn't git to see him; was too damn anxious to git me a little outfit organized and hit the trail.

"Stone broke, and jest outa the pen, 'twasn't so easy for me to git said outfit together, but I done it finally and here we are. I got a bunch of boys that'll do to ride the river with; some of 'em plain out-and-out bandits; others that have done a right smart wide loopin' and others that come along jest for the hell of it. But the whole shootin' match is shore I'm plumb right. They're with me to the last ditch—and then some—to git back the cattle and hosses you Longhorns stole from my brother and then run every damned one of yuh range and cattle thieves outa the country."

"I kin believe that," said Weaver, glancing toward the weather-beaten, cold-eyed and for the most part bewhiskered men. They had finished their meal and were now smoking and resting in silence.

The others, three in all, not counting the man who had ridden away with Jan, Weaver guessed must be on sentry duty.

"Mind if I ask yuh some questions that seem mighty important to me?" the cowboy asked Thad Kelly.

"Shoot," said the veteran Texan. "I got nothin' to do but talk. We're waitin' for night to make our next raid. Thanks to you, our first big steal—if that's what yuh'd call it—hasn't done us a mite of good. Yeah, yuh locoed young fool, yuh took 'round seven hundred cattle right out from under our guns. How'd yuh dast do it?"

"Never mind that part now," Weaver said quietly. He knew he was as helpless as a broken-winged grouse surrounded by coyotes, but still he hoped to talk matters over rationally—and if it could be done, persuade Thad Kelly to call off his war; a war which could end only in disaster to the old bear and his efficient crew.

"Kelly," the cowboy began soberly, "I want yuh to know that I had no part

[Turn page]

in yore bein' sent over the road in Texas. I've known nothing about yuh since yuh left here twelve years ago. Nor, so far as I've ever heard, did my neighbors know one thing about what happened to yuh."

THAD KELLY'S hands clenched and his lips tightened. The dark eyes flashed. "But they did!" he rasped harshly. "This Paley Jones was yore tool and—"

"I can't place that buzzard. Describe him. Know where he is now?"

"Only wish I did! Tall, skinny feller; long, slim fingers; plumb good with a gun or a deck of cards. Light complexion, deep cleft in his chin, and snake eyes—unblinkin' pale grey eyes that give yuh the creeps. Sandy hair, and a jagged white scar at the nape of his neck what makes him a marked man. 'Twas a peculiar shaped scar; knife wound, I reckon. It zig-zagged like a letter S." He glanced up at the startled cowboy. "By gollies, yuh do know the sidewinder!"

"Sid Atwell!" cried Weaver. "Yes, that snaky jasper was workin' for Diamond H Malden when we all come to the Longhorn. A mean cuss and tricky. . . . Working for Malden. . . . I wonder—I wonder—"

"What?" barked Kelly.

"Never mind jest yet. Let's jump to somethin' else. Thad, you didn't know nothin' about the promissory note Bill Kelly got in payment for his cattle and horses?"

"Not a damn thing 'till last night when Billy told me about it. Told me how you crooks claim to have paid it, but didn't, and never will. Jan, too, told me about that note—she'd found the original and lost it. Now her and her family ain't nothin' to show you hell's spawn owe 'em a nickel. All the more reason for me to—"

"Hold yore hosses!" Weaver interrupted. "No sense in gittin' so proddy now. I'm tellin' yuh I've found out somethin' that plumb smells of skunk about the collectin' on that debt."

"I kin believe that," Kelly interjected meaningly.

"Thad Kelly, if I swear to you that I'll see the note is paid in full to Jan Kelly will yuh call off yore war dogs?"

The older man glowered savagely. Then he clipped grimly:

"Hell, no! For even if yuh'd swear to see that was done and if yuh'd do yore damnedest to shoot square with us Kellys, what could yuh do? You don't amount to a tinker's damn on the Longhorn, Bun Weaver. Martin Malden is the boss. He rules the roost and you know it.

"Then why didn't yuh hit him first crack, Kelly?"

"Reckoned he had too many men around the Diamond H for my small force. I've found out different." Thad Kelly glanced briefly at Billy and Weaver realized the boy had told his uncle many things. "Might as well tell yuh, Weaver, since yuh'll git no chance to interfere, we're hittin' the Diamond H tonight, and I personally intend to gun Malden. Tough as I am, bitter as I am, hungry for revenge as I am, Weaver, I drew the line on killin' first off. Allowed we'd put yuh on the run by burnin' yore ranches, stealin' yore cattle, but—"

"Speaking blunt, Kelly," Weaver flared, "yuh're lyin'!"

Kelly scrambled stiffly to his feet—the old man was far from supple—and slapped his hand on his low-slung Colt.

"Yuh kin call me 'most anything except a liar and not be far wrong," he said in a terrible voice. "But I'll stand for nobody's callin' me that. Swaller it or I'll kill yuh now!"

WEAVER'S heart was jumping; blood pounding in his temples made his head throb with pain. Yet his voice was controlled and his eyes met Thad Kelly's fierce ones squarely.

"Thad, you can't shoot an unarmed

man. Yuh're not that low and ornery. I said yuh was lyin' because two of McNulty's cowboys was shot dead. I suppose when yuh stole McNulty's Wineglass herd, or else yore drygulcher got 'em. Yore drygulcher killed my cowboy, Four Dot Fred, and—" his voice was cold and hard as a wintry blast—"the sonovagun would have dropped me only I beat him to the kill."

Puzzled, as he saw how Kelly's expression had suddenly changed, he went on grimly:

"Yore killer was certainly layin' for me yesterday evening; lived long enough to name you as the man that hired him. Three killers on Longhorn range and you have the gall to try to tell me yuh drew the line on murder!"

Over by the fire a man called:

"That's the truth, Tincup cowboy. We ain't killed nobody—yet."

Billy Kelly, looking white and frightened, said:

"Uncle Thad, last night at the Diamond H before Mace Malden and me rode out to Cougar Canyon I heard them ranchers say two McNulty cowboys and Bun Weaver's man had been killed."

Thad Kelly shook his head. "No savvy," he muttered. "Weaver, all my men are accounted for. We ain't short one drygulcher. We never had one! Somethin' hellish here we don't know nothin' about. Still think I'm lyin'?"

Weaver had finally managed to get to his feet and stood rigid, his strong face taut and drawn. He stood looking straight into Thad Kelly's burning dark eyes. And the old-timer met his gaze unflinchingly. Weaver didn't know what to say, what to think, until suddenly Kelly's words, "Somethin' hellish here we know nothin' about," again lighted in his mind the flame of suspicion—suspicion which had been planted there by Jan Kelly's disclosures. He was recalling all she had told him: Frank Newhouse, the man who had worked for the Kelly's near Nugget all these years had come to the Diamond H to tell Malden where the original note was hidden. He was a spy hired by Malden. Forgery had been resorted to, and the collection of the Kelly debt had been a gigantic swindle concocted by some clever scoundrel. Furthermore Weaver had just learned that a Malden man, Sid Atwell, under the name of Paley Jones, had cleverly engineered a scheme in far-away Texas to land old Thad Kelly behind bars.

Weaver's thoughts leaped to the unsolved murder and robbery of Longhorn rancher Jack Deane. Was the same sinister hand behind that mysterious, evil deed? One step farther and the Tincup cowboy had reached the conclusion that Diamond H Malden's machinations extended to this present war on the Longhorn.

Malden, he believed, deep-thinking and far-seeing, crafty beyond belief, had anticipated the raid of Thad Kelly and had prepared to make capital of it for his own ends; to further his own and the ambitions of his two scheming, despicable sons.

"Slow, fellow, slow," Weaver admonished himself. "Mind all yuh got your teeth sunk in is jest an idea. Yet, by grab, there was not a single Diamond H man with the ranchers last night when I stopped them from ridin' into an ambush at Cougar Canyon. And—Malden coulda hired that drygulcher!"

THE thoughts passed through Weaver's mind so swiftly that scarcely a minute had elapsed before he answered Thad Kelly.

"Even though the evidence looks black against yuh, Thad, I believe yuh, and I'm takin' back what I said. I'll swallow that word I threw in yore teeth." As the old Texan relaxed and even grinned faintly, he added, "Now

you and me gotta have a right-down-to-hard-pan talk. I'm goin' to show yuh—"

The thud-thud of hoofbeats sounded. A rider on a furiously ridden horse dashed into the small open area, pulled up.

"Longhorn fellers on our trail!" he clipped. "Fifteen of 'em. They come up over the mountain south o' Cougar Canyon, found our last night camp, found the fresh tracks made this mornin' and are headin' this way."

"Fifteen?" Weaver thought quickly. "That'll be the bunch I met last night. Looks like they's still none of Malden's men among 'em."

Kelly's camp had sprung to life as swiftly as frightened steers leap from their bed ground at a thunderclap. Men were throwing packs on horses and slapping the bridles on their mounts.

"This ain't no place to stand 'em off," Thad Kelly said tersely. "We'll lead them coyotes a chase back into the mountains and — " Suddenly he whipped out his Colt to cover Bun Weaver, threw an order to one red-headed fellow: "Bring Weaver a hoss, Red. Tie his hands to the horn. Hobble his feet under the nag's belly. Hustle!"

Two more sentries joined the crew, accounting for the entire Kelly force as tallied by Weaver last night, counting Tex Jarvis who'd ridden away with Jan Kelly.

To the Tincup cowboy it seemed less than five minutes before they were on the move, climbing a wooded ridge that led farther back into the mountains and as they rode, Weaver caught one far distant glimpse of his friends, the Longhorn ranchers with their cowpunchers. They were riding cautiously, but with grim purpose, on the trail of the Kelly outlaws. Bright sunlight danced and glittered on rifles carried across the forks of their saddles.

Man hunters, aroused, vengeful, were stalking their quarry!

CHAPTER XI

The Mystery Man

ORMOND VAN ORMOND realized, after he had aided Jan Kelly to leave the Diamond H ranch, that his own immediate necessity was to hide. In just a moment four men would reach the dark stable, for in addition to Diamond H Malden, himself and Frank Newhouse, other men had popped out of the bunkhouse; Snip and the old gray-bearded choreman.

All were racing to the stable where Bronc lay unconscious. They would know instantly that Jan Kelly could not have laid out this burly ruffian; that she must also have had help to get a horse so swiftly.

Van Ormond dared not cross the open yard. But by hugging the dark ground and circling to the left, passing behind the bunkhouse and Bill Kelly's old cabin, he gained the farther side of the big main house. The back door was locked, but earlier Ormond Van Ormond had found that the key of his bedroom door also fitted the back door.

Whereupon Mr. Ormond Van Ormond had told himself, "I can get out if I'm obliged to," and then had investigated Diamond H Malden's safe. There was money in that safe, a great deal more than even a prosperous rancher might be expected to have on hand. But Van Ormond touched none of it. He was searching for documents or letters. One packet of letters, tied with a red string, he had thrust into his coat pocket. He had not dared strike a light. However, if this packet proved valueless he would return it later—perhaps.

When the man had looked at his loot by lamplight in his own room, his eyes behind the dark glasses had taken on a steely glint. He had slapped his thighs with exultant satisfaction and would have perused every letter in the pack had not a sound across the corridor attracted his attention. It came from Jan's room and was the squeak of a bed being moved over to the window.

Van Ormond tied up the packet of stolen letters, pocketed them, and silently sped to the rear door. There he had let himself out just in time to see Jan Kelly sliding down a blanket rope to the ground.

"She'll need help," had been his quick conclusion.

Aware that a man was guarding the stable, Van Ormond had circled around and stealthily approached that building from the rear, and so efficiently did he back a horse, already saddled, from one stall and lead the animal outside that Bronc, stationed at the front door, had not heard. A shot-loaded quirt found on the saddle-rack had sufficed as a billy with which to tap Bronc on the tender spot at the nape of his neck.

However, this service for Jan, and that of placing her astride the horse was not all Ormond Van Ormond had done for the girl. Malden's words about the original note had come to his ears and with it the quck thought:

"'Original note,' eh? The girl has it! But if she's caught—and she's liable to be—she'll lose that precious scrap of paper. 'Twill be safer with me."

So it was that at the moment he had lifted Jan to her saddle, his right thumb and forefinger had dived into the shallow pocket of her skirt, then darted to his own coat pocket.

NOW, having safely reached the ranchhouse, Van Ormond entered by the rear door, tiptoed into the kitchen and on to the store room or pantry. All was dark, yet because he had scouted out the lay of the land earlier, the man went, without hesitation, directly to a large coffee drum—a fifty-pound can of unground coffee such as are purchased by large ranches. Deep in this coffee he buried the bundle of letters.

Retracing his steps he climbed the back stairs to his room, entered, and without lighting the lamp picked out his shaving brush from among his personal belongings. Moving over to the window which faced the yard, he unscrewed the handle of the brush, rolled into a small wad the original dusty and yellowed promissory note tendered Bill Kelly by the ranchers of the Longhorn, and thrust it into the hollow handle of the brush. He screwed the handle back in place.

He could not see much out near the stable, but he did see one rider, Snip, dash away in pursuit of Jan Kelly. He could plainly hear Malden savagely demanding to know who had hit Bronc and who'd helped the girl? Bronc, however, wasn't talking just yet.

"Somebody slugged this dumb bronc buster and somebody helped that girl!" grated Malden, shaken out of his usual imperturbability. "We'll find that sneakin' hombre!"

Ormond Van Ormond, chuckling silently, slipped out of his clothes, donned his night shirt and crawled into bed. None too soon. Steps clumped along the hall, his door was thrust violently open. A match flared. Blinking sleepily as he lifted his head from the pillow, Van Ormond saw Malden and Newhouse glowering at him.

"Er—time to get up?" he inquired, yawning.

"Shore yuh ain't been up?" Diamond H demanded curtly.

"Not since I went to bed, Mr. Malden."

"Humph. And yuh've slept right through the—the noises goin' around here?"

"I've been asleep, yes," lied Van Or-

mond. "Woke up as your light flashed in my eyes. Anything wrong?"

"No. . . . Still, I'm overlooking no bets. . . . Tenderfoot, you sit over in that chair, and if yuh know what's best for yuh, sit quiet. We're searchin' yore room."

"Some one did that while I was at supper, or soon afterwards," Van Ormond remarked amiably. "I can't imagine why."

Ignoring this, Malden and Newhouse made an exhaustive search of the room and of everything in it, even to tearing the bed to pieces and turning over the mattress. While this was going on, Ormond Van Ormond, without appearing to do so, sharply scrutinized Frank Newhouse, a smallish, middle-aged man with sharp features, a sandy complexion and deceptively mild gray eyes.

Van Ormond's own ordinary, rather homely face betrayed no particular interest, but his pulses quickened. In one niche of his mind was pigeonholed a description of this harmless-looking man, and also a remembered photograph of him. The photo had been taken long ago when Newhouse was much younger and had been known by another name. Then he had been employed by a large trust company in Cleveland, Ohio.

THE description, however, was right up-to-date. It had been written by Harris Clark, postmaster at Nugget, and now in the sleeping room allotted to him on the Diamond H Ranch, Ormond Van Ormond's quest for a "lost brother" had come to an end!

"This is rather unusual, gentlemen," he remarked. "I wish you'd tell a tenderfoot what it's all about."

Malden replied shortly, "Never mind. . . . All through, Frank? Let's go."

Van Ormond put his bed together. Then he sat by the window, gazing out across the valley of Longhorn River until presently a flash of light at the edge of the dense willows bordering that river attracted his attention. It was such a light as a man might make applying a match to a cigarette, a flare for an instant, then gone. But it caused Ormond Van Ormond to put on his clothes, to slip ghostlike down the back staircase and leave the house, and presently to approach the tall, dense willows five or six hundred yards south of the ranch buildings.

Paused at the edge of this brush he listened, hearing faint sounds. Making his way through the jungle toward these sounds he discovered in the midst of the willows, near the chuckling river itself, and in this open space ten or a dozen horses on picket ropes, were grazing. It was the crunch of their teeth and the slight rustling noise of their hoofs in the rank grass that he had heard.

Then he could hear something else—the indistinct mumble of human voices farther upstream. Ormond Van Ormond was a stoical fellow, yet his nerves were tingling as he prowled through the brush past the horses, drawing nearer and nearer to those voices.

At last he was at the edge of another open area, and his eyes, accustomed to the darkness, distinguished the shapes of several men. Although they had no fire, it looked as if these men had a camp here in the jungle of brush, for scattered about were beds, saddles, guns some food and other items.

CHAPTER XII

Signals

DIAMOND H MALDEN and Newhouse were both present in the camp. Van Ormond could not recognize the rest of the men by their voices; nor would he have known them if he could have seen them clearly.

"Boys, Diamond H was saying, "it was to be expected some little things might not go just as we planned; things we could iron out easy enough. But this thing that's plumb unforeseen has got me up in the air. Somebody helped that girl git away! Who is that somebody? Where is he? How much does he know about us?"

"That somebody is learning more all the time," thought Van Ormond grimly.

"Well, we ain't seen no prowler," a voice said. "Anyhow, Diamond H, Snip'll overtake that Kelly girl and bring her back. Did yuh say our old friend, Newhouse, got here too late with his news about where that slip o' paper was hid, and the girl had beat yuh to it?"

"That's what I said, Nevada. For reasons I don't need to explain now, I want that original note. I must git it! And that ain't the only thing botherin' me, men. Jest before Frank Newhouse and me started out here to talk with you fellers, I happened to think that the note I had in my bill-fold would be better off in my safe. And when I opened that safe, no more'n ten minutes ago, I found out that some important papers are missin'."

"And did that give Diamond H a turn!" Newhouse put in.

"It's right down damn mysterious!" exclaimed Malden. "I'm tellin' you fellers 'cause yuh're hand-picked men and I trust every one of yuh. But somebody we don't know nothin' about has come to the Diamond H and—"

"Which reminds me, boss," spoke up Nevada. "Us fellers hid in the willers this-a-way can't guard the ranch buildin's like we'd oughter. S'posin' Thad Kelly was to all of a sudden attack the place and set it afire, mebbe even grab you 'fore we could jump him."

"Nevada, I told yuh I'm not afraid of that. Scar Sellers, in addition to his other job, was to keep an eye out for Kelly. Scar'll know about any raid Thad Kelly has in mind."

"And who's Scar Sellers?" wondered Ormond Van Ormond. "What's his 'other' job?"

"Yuh're a mite forgetful, Nevada," Malden was going on. "Have yuh got straight in yore mind the signals I arranged to flash from the house to tell yuh what to do?"

"All o' us remember 'em," said a new voice, and Nevada added:

"Shore. I got 'em down pat. White flag from the third story winder means for us to sit tight and do nothin' no matter what appears to be happenin' at the buildin's. Red flags means for us to zip outa hidin' jest a hellin', and shootin' to kill. Shootin' to kill whoever is attackin' the ranch or gittin' set to attack it. But o' course that'll be Kelly and his cow thieves from Texas, 'cause if things work out like we expect 'em to, Kelly's a-goin' to kill off all the little ranchers. Likewise their cowboys."

"White light," stated another man, "should it be after dark, means the same as the white flag; red light the same as the red flag."

VAN ORMOND felt a shiver run through his body. What a diabolical scheme! Diamond H Malden and

his cold-blooded crew of murderers playing Thad Kelly against the ranchers of the Longhorn, hoping and expecting that Kelly would annihilate the ranchers. And after that the Diamond H meant to massacre Kelly's force.

"Yes," Malden agreed, "yuh've got the signals straight. Now be shure to git this through yore thick head, Nevada. I've learned that the best laid plans kin go wrong. So if matters don't work out like they should, I'll mebbe summon you boys to finish off my neighbors. At least, what's left of the dumb, blind suckers after Kelly gits through with 'em. However, if Mace plants a hint or two in the ears of Thad Kelly tonight, like I told him, and then plants another idea in the minds of McNulty and Leckenby and the rest, I'm hopin' these said neighbors'll be wiped out this very night at Cougar Canyon. . . . Wonder if that ain't Mace comin' home now?"

Malden was listening to a sound of hoof beats in the quiet darkness.

"Or maybe it's Snip bringin' back that girl," he suggested.

The drum of hoofbeats grew louder. Only one horse, Van Ormond decided, but whoever was riding that horse was certainly sending it along. The rider had dashed up to the buildings. But in only a moment more the horseman was pounding over to the willows. He gave a peculiar shrill whistle. One of the group answered, duplicating the sound.

Then Mace Malden came crashing through the brush and pulled up a staggering, spur-gashed and foam-flecked horse.

"Well? Matter with yuh?" asked Diamond H coldly. "I kin see yuh've bungled or—"

"Bungled!" flashed Mace. "Somebody 'round here bungled a-plenty to let Jan Kelly git off the ranch."

"Yeah," retorted his father. "But what kin you know about it?"

"I met her. She was headed toward Cougar Canyon. I stopped her, aimed to bring her back, but Bun Weaver"—the tall, blond young rider took time out to curse Weaver—"he popped up from nowhere, cracked down on me with his gun, and rather'n take a bullet I—I had to let him lift my smoker. He took my good hoss, too, and left me this dead-on-its-feet nag. Then he rid off with the girl. Gunless, I couldn't stop that, so I fogged for home. I want a couple of good men, fresh hosses; a rifle and two sixes for myself. I'm goin' to track that maverick and kill him my own self!"

RUMBLES of amazement greeted this savage announcement, and then Diamond H said with a sort of terrible quietness which betrayed how he was seething inside:

"Before yuh start, Mace, give a full account of yoreself. Yuh saw Thad Kelly? Left the kid?"

"Shore! And Thad done jest exactly like you figgered he would. The threat of doin' somethin' to the girl if he refused to talk turkey made him see red, set him right on the prod. Yeah, he said 'On with the war!' Then I jest hinted as mebbe the ranchers would be ridin' up Cougar Canyon, and left the salty old fighter.

"At Windy Hollow I saw the ranchers all bunched, ready and spoilin' for a fight. Told 'em where Kelly was camped and that Cougar Canyon was wide open. Figgerin' that was enough, I said I'd lam for home to git more help. Dad, don't yuh go blamin' me. I shore thought McNulty, Leckenby and all the rest would ride straight into an ambush. But that double-damned Bun Weaver stopped 'em and saved their hides."

"So-o? We've got Bun Weaver to thank for that scheme blowin' up? Mace, what I want to know before we hear any more of yore story is: Do yuh know by what chance it happens Weaver is still alive? Scar Sellers had

orders to git that cowboy. Have yuh seen Scar?"

"No," said Mace Malden. "None of us'll ever see Scar Sellers alive again. Bun Weaver killed him!"

It seemed to the watching, listening Van Ormond that this blunt announcement stunned the Malden men. Diamond H himself was the first to speak.

"So we kin thank Weaver for *three* upsets to our plans in one night! Pick two men, Mace, and git that hombre. Bring back the girl, too. What in hell yuh waitin' for?"

"Jest a second, boss," spoke up Nevada. "I'm hankerin' for some more details."

"If yuh mean does Weaver know the truth of this set-up, he don't," snapped Mace Malden. "He thinks Scar was Thad Kelly's hired bushwhacker. As for his tippin' off McNulty and the rest of the outfit, I gather that Weaver had taken a trail we don't know nothin' about back into the mountains and got close to Kelly's camp. Slippin' away from there when he'd heard what was up, he headed off McNulty in time. As for what he intended to do with Jan Kelly after he took her under his wing, he just remarked he believed he could stop the war. How, I don't know."

"I git the idea," growled Diamond H. "Guessin', of course, but I'll bet I'm right. Weaver thought the Kelly girl could persuade her hard-bitten old uncle to lay off. Hope he's wrong. For if Thad Kelly draws in his horns now. . . . Well, men, we'll go on and play this waitin' game, see what happens. Come 'long, Frank. We'll go to the house. . . . Mace, if yuh bungle this new job I'll wring yore neck myself."

Ormond Van Ormond thought it high time he was taking himself elsewhere. So far as he knew he was the only man outside of Malden's own crew who knew the truth of the situation on the Longhorn; knew what a hellish, doublecrossing scheme Malden had concocted, and would undoubtedly carry out unless one Ormond Van Ormond blew it up.

YES, he must get off this ranch. However, it would be safest to wait until Malden had gone to bed and everything had quieted down.

Van Ormond returned to the ranch house and to his room. He had closed the door when, with the savageness of wolves, two men pounced upon him. They vised his arms, bore him crashing to the floor. One held Van Ormond powerless while the other lighted the lamp. Then he saw the gray-bearded chore man and a youth whom he had not before met, but whom, by his striking resemblance to old Diamond H, he immediately recognized as Flash Malden.

"Spyin' for Thad Kelly or on yore own hook?" inquired Flash, grinning sardonically at the captive.

"By George, boys, I can take a joke," Van Ormond said innocently, "but aren't you carrying things a mite—"

"We figger we've grabbed the hombre that slugged Bronc Chalmers over his noodle," Flash cut in. "Likewise the snoop that tapped the old man's safe. What's more yuh jest heard a plenty down in the willers, didn't yuh? I seen yuh—and it was shore one peculiar way for a tenderfoot to be actin'. Tenderfoot? Hell! So I jest laid for yuh. The old man'll shore be tickled we got yuh. And lemme tell yuh, feller, Diamond H kin git plenty proddy. Best for you to tell him immejit what yuh done with them papers outa his safe, or—well, yuh won't kick the bucket right off, but—"

Thoughts sped through Ormond Van Ormond's mind. Diamond H and Frank Newhouse had not yet returned to the house. Perhaps if he acted now Van Ormond had one bare chance for his life. With a sudden mighty effort he broke the graybeard's hold, bounded to his feet and sent the man crashing through the window. As the fellow's

body smashed the glass, Van Ormond hurled himself after the falling man.

He struck the solid ground feet first, fell forward on his face, picked himself up just as Flash Malden at the shattered window above began to shoot, and raced toward the stable. Almost he had reached his objective, unhit by any of Flash Malden's wild bullets, when out of that stable stepped Diamond H and Frank Newhouse. Starlight glinted on their drawn guns.

"Stop!"

"Lift 'em!"

Ormond Van Ormond stopped. He "lifted 'em!"

CHAPTER XIII

Valiant Rider

JAN KELLY rode south with the Kelly man, Tex Jarvis, across country that was beautiful, rugged and wild. But she scarcely saw it. Nor did she note the bright sunshine of this glorious autumn day smiling on her troubled face.

Knowing her father had taught Jan how bitter, stubborn and revengeful men could be. Yet she had found Thad Kelly far more bitter, far more stubborn than her own father had been. A man ridden by an obsession for vengeance.

With tears in her eyes, a huskiness in her sweet voice, she had begged him to forget this obsession; to call a halt to his war on the Longhornites—and had failed to sway him from his grim and terrible purpose. Billy also had refused to listen to her; had even refused to go back home with her.

"I'm the man of our family," he had announced. "This is as much our scrap, or more even than 'tis Uncle Thad's, and I'm fightin' right alongside him. But Uncle Thad's dead right, Jan. 'Tain't no place for a woman. You gotta go home."

What could she now hope to do? One half of her mind was occupied with this immediate problem; the other half was filled with thoughts of Bun Weaver, with his lean brown face and his steady, honest brown eyes, who had hoped as fervently as Jan to put an end to the conflict. Weaver, who had kissed her and said, "Love smashes through all barriers."

"If that were only true!" thought Jan. "But this awful war will go on until Uncle Thad is killed. Billy, too. And—and I can see no light ahead. None!"

"I reckon we kin git down through these mountains 'fore dark," the man riding beside her drawled; "circle 'round that town o' Last Stand without bein' seen and strike the main road beyond."

"Yes," said Jan tonelessly. "Supposing I'd tell you I wouldn't go home?"

"I got my orders, ma'am, and I'd shore be 'bliged to take yuh. Shucks, yuh can't nowise do nothin' here nohow. Nothin' yuh'd like to do."

"Tex, what do you personally expect to get out of this ugly business?"

"Git me a li'l stake—if we win." The man grinned. "Howsomever my in'trest ain't plumb impersonal. I've been a friend o' yore pa and Thad long time now. Yuh all shore got a raw deal."

"Yes, of course, of course," cried the girl. "But what's the sense of reviving a feud after twelve years? And whatever in this world caused my uncle to hold off for so long if—"

"Yuh didn't know how the Longhorn cow thieves had him throwed in the pen for life, ma'am?"

"In the pen?" Janet caught her

breath, startled. "Tell me about it, Tex."

Tex Jarvis took his time in the telling of the story, wandering and reminiscing, but when at last he had concluded it, Jan had something new about which to think: Her uncle's being so sure that, through the agency of Paley Jones, the Longhorn ranchers were responsible for his imprisonment in Texas.

"Now mebbe yuh kin savvy what makes old Thad so doggone ringy," Tex said. "Listen! Do I hear rifles a-talkin'? I shore do."

JAN reined up, fear clutching at her throat. The sound of firing was indistinct and far away, yet she knew it came from Cougar Canyon or its immediate vicinity.

"It must be a fight between the ranchers and my uncle's men!" she said. "Oh, how I wish I could stop it!"

"Yuh done yore best, ma'am," Tex assured. "Le's jog along."

Presently the boom of guns died away; silence again settled over the mountains. Staring straight ahead, Jan lapsed into silence. Her companion did not break in on her thoughts, but continually his eyes roved the landscape to right and to left, ahead and even to rearward.

The forenoon passed and the shadows were turning eastward as the two rode along a swale between high ridges to enter a narrow gap. Here, most unexpectedly, they met three horsemen, with rifles and six-shooters ready for action, barring the trail.

After one look, Tex raised his arms. Jan, her eyes wide with fear and astonishment, gasped:

"Mace Malden!"

"Yes, Miss Kelly," said Mace. "We followed the tracks of yore hoss and of my black that Bun Weaver stole last night. We was still on that trail when we caught a glimpse of you riders and circled to head yuh off. I'm plumb disappointed that Weaver ain't with yuh, Miss Kelly. Where is he?"

"I don't know," the girl replied truthfully, wishing with all her heart that Weaver would suddenly appear as he had last night.

"Yuh don't, eh? I reckon yuh do . . . Boys, plug this jigger if he bats an eye. He's one of Kelly's outlaws . . . 'Pears like he was escortin' yuh outa the country, Miss Kelly. It also 'pears like yuh musta visited yore uncle's camp."

"I did."

"Was Bun Weaver with you? Did he throw in with—"

"He didn't visit my uncle's camp with me. Nor has he thrown in with Thad Kelly, if that's what you want to know."

"That's somethin' I wanted to know. Once more, where is Weaver, the doublecrossin'—"

"I don't know, I tell you. I see you're terribly anxious to find him now that you have two bodyguards along to keep him from giving you another good beating."

Rage suffused Mace Malden's cold and cruel face.

"Yuh seem to favor that skunk," he snarled. "He's a traitor to his own side and he's marked for death! These boys with me, Ab Rutgears and Paley Jones, have got orders to shoot him down like a coyote."

"Paley Jones!" ejaculated Tex, eyeing the slender member of the evil-faced pair. "Thad Kelly'd enjoy pow'-ful much to meet up with yuh."

"He probably will sooner or later." The man called Paley Jones smiled sardonically at Tex Jarvis and at Jan.

"Pull this bandit's teeth, boys," commanded Mace. "Tie him. Take him away with yuh. You know what to do with him later. And keep up the hunt for Weaver! I'll jest be takin' Miss Kelly back to the Diamond H."

"Huh?" Paley Jones grunted. "We

kinda got the idea yuh was honin' to kill Weaver yore ownself."

"Don't give me none of yore lip, Paley!" Mace Malden snarled. "If yuh are a heap more important 'n I am, I'm dishin' out the orders. You buzzards git Bun Weaver! Don't come home till yuh do. . . . Miss Kelly, pass me yore word not to try to git away and yuh kin ride free and easy like."

THE tanned face of old Tex had strangely gray. "Why don't yuh let her go?" he said huskily. "She can't do yuh no harm."

"Keep yore nose outa this, Texican. . . . How about that promise, Miss Kelly?'

"I'll promise you nothing, Mace Malden."

"Then I'll be obliged to tie yuh to yore saddle."

Mace dismounted. Paley Jones had already stepped down from his mount. The third man, Ab Rutgears, kept his Colt trained upon Tex, nor was he neglecting to watch Jan, hawk-eyed. Therefore, although the girl still had Mace Malden's big .44 which Weaver had handed her the night before, she dared not attempt to use it.

Mace Malden reached up and unbuckled the over-large, sagging belt from around her waist, buckled it on himself, eyeing her with mocking triumph.

"Not even a pretty girl kin monkey with us Maldens and git away with it," he observed. "I'll git a piggin' string to tie yore little hands to the saddle horn." He turned toward his horse.

Paley Jones had curtly ordered Tex to get off and turn his back. Silently the Texan had obeyed, and Paley was knotting his wrists together behind his back when Mace Malden stepped toward his horse.

And that moment Jan acted. She drove her heels into her mount's sides and the startled animal lunged into Mace Malden, knocking him a-sprawl and trampling on his body as it flashed onward.

Paley Jones pivoted, fired once at the horse's hind legs and missed. Ab Rutgears, with a savage jab of spurs, brought his own mount to life in a frantic attempt to head off the girl. As he bent from his saddle, snatching at her bridle reins, she swished her quirt down on his neck with stinging force. Rutgears lost his balance, toppled from his saddle, his horse leaping wildly aside.

In a breath Jan was among the pines, her running horse dodging among the trees. Pandemonium behind her; Paley Jones emptying his six-shooter, uselessly, for the trees protected the girl and her mount. Loud, chagrined voices indicated that her desperate attempt to win free had not helped Tex Jarvis.

"Stand hitched, cow thief!" yelled Paley Jones. "I got another six that's full."

"Shoot her hoss! Shoot her hoss!" Mace Malden cursed roundly. "Don't hit the girl but bring down that nag."

"I'll git her!" Ab Rutgears yelled.

"No!" bellowed Mace. "I'll 'tend to that job my ownself. You've got yore orders."

The smack of a human body as it hit saddle leather; then the thump of hoofs. Pursuing hoofs!

How Jan wished she knew these mountains! Useless for her to attempt to find Bun Weaver to warn him. She'd head south and hope to outride Mace Malden—across this maze of rough, forested country and strike the road to Cragmont.

IF she could reach Cragmont, she'd pour out her story to the sheriff. The law must interfere in this war; law must be brought to the Longhorn, regardless of the consequences to her uncle and his crew. They had burned ranches, had stolen cattle and horses, had even done murder, so the ranchers had said. But—a sob caught in Jan's

throat, for this decision cost her untold mental suffering—the fight must be stopped before more lives were lost.

Her racing horse flashed out into a valley, sped along it. Mace Malden was not in sight. But looking back when she reached the far end of this valley where the wooded hills closed in once again, she saw him. He was spurring desperately a good quarter mile behind her. The Diamond H horse Jan was riding was swifter than his. She'd lose him yet!

Lose him she did! But that desperate ride through the Silver Tip Mountains was a nightmare to Jan Kelly ever after. Time and again she came to chasms she could not cross and was therefore compelled to follow up until she either found a place she could cross, or passed around those dark, deep canyons. Twice she found herself in windfalls where fallen timber forced her gallant horse to a snail's pace. Had she only known it, however, it was these very windfalls which were throwing Mace Malden off her trail.

Once, while descending a precipitous slope, Jan's mount slipped and slid and rolled thirty feet to the bottom of a gulch. Free of horse and saddle, she toboganned after the animal, picked herself up, mounted and went on. Bedraggled, grimy, hungry and worn-out, on a horse that was little better off, at sundown Janet Kelly came to open country near Last Stand.

On a sage brush hill she reined in, gazing toward the town, neither seeing nor hearing anything of Mace Malden. Oh, to go there, bathe her face, get something to eat, a fresh horse! However, she fought down the impulse. For Jan had learned yesterday that the citizens of Last Stand would surely side in with the Longhorn ranchers; take Malden's part.

She allowed her jaded horse to rest a few minutes before she resolutely turned southward again. Loping along the road as rapidly as she dared push the horse, when the sudden rush of hoofbeats behind her sent her heart into her throat, freezing the blood in her veins.

She quirted her mount to a wild gallop. But no speed was left in its legs. Out of the twilight behind Jan loomed a rider on a fresh, strong horse that was swiftly overhauling her lagging mount.

THE man in the saddle, slender, youthful, was Snip, the Diamond H hand. He forged up alongside Jan, because she had no weapon, was too tired and dispirited to offer any resistance, he quickly stopped her horse.

"Yuh shore give me the slip last night," he said. "And jest 'cause I was scairt to go back and face Diamond H, I hunted high and low. I even rid to Cragmont and stuck around that town for a spell. Couldn't see nor hear of yuh, so I come back and camped in Last Stand, a-waitin' and a-watchin'. When yuh come out on that hill, I lit out after yuh, and am I lucky!"

Jan didn't answer. New hoof beats were ringing a dull *chud-thud-chud* in the soft twilight, drawing steadily nearer. As Jan's captor turned their horses, Mace Malden materialized out of the half darkness. His hollow-flanked horse was on its last legs; foam-flecked, spur-marked from shoulders to hips.

Mace himself showed little sign of fatigue. Shoving back his hat he grinned at the hopeless girl.

"Yuh're shore a game little filly and hell bent to git away," he said. "Good work, Snip. Le's go."

"By the way, Miss Kelly," Snip remarked. "In Cragmont I heard news of somebody in Nugget I reckon yuh know. Harris Clark, the old postmaster, killed hisself sometime day befor yesterday."

"Killed hisself, eh?" repeated Mace Malden in an odd tone, glancing slant-eyed at the girl.

CHAPTER XIV

Frying Pan to Fire

NIGHT of the same day found Bun Weaver still Thad Kelly's prisoner; found Thad's rough and ready followers chuckling over the way they had led the Longhorn ranchers a merry chase far back into the higher fastness of Silver Tip Range, finally setting the ranchers on a false trail.

This false trail had purposely been made by one of Kelly's band driving nine loose horses ahead of him. From cover, the rest of the band had seen McNulty with his grim crew take up those horse tracks, following them deeper into the mountains, riding farther and farther from the men they sought.

"About midnight, "Big Foot Ben," the lone Kelly rider, would abandon the horses and by cautiously circling the pursuing ranchers, rejoin his own crew.

So close had McNulty, Leckenby, Dell Floyd and the other man hunters passed the hidden Kellyites that Bun Weaver could have called to them—had he wished to die with a bullet through his brain. However Weaver would not have announced the presence of the Kelly men even if a villanous-looking, black-whiskered brigand had not been holding a cocked gun at his head with the whispered injunction, "If yuh holler yuh're a goner."

A pitched battle between these forces was the last thing in the world Bun Weaver wanted to see. Now, shortly after sunset's glory had faded to darkness, the rustlers were riding to take a trail which Jan Kelly had innocently revealed to her uncle when asked how she had reached their camp. This was the trail down the ridge north of Crazy Creek and past the Tincup ranch. Tonight, Thad Kelly intended to raid the Diamond H.

Following his talk with the old leader, Weaver had been given no further chance to present to Kelly his side of the argument. It was now about nine o'clock and, strung out in double file, the outfit was moving at a brisk walk when suddenly from the small and rocky hogback at their right came a stentorian command:

"Pull up, Kelly!"

It was as startling as a gun shot.

"Great Snakes! An ambush? A man abreast of Weaver jerked.

"Over on the off sides of yore hosses, boys! Ride like hell!" Thad Kelly was yelling when a call from the rocks lifted to him.

"Don't ride! Don't shoot! We're plumb peaceful."

"Peaceful?" Thad shouted hoarsely. He knew what a dangerous predicament he was in if the small, boulder-strewn ridge was manned by *his* enemies.

"Peaceful, yep," called the voice from the rocks. "If yuh're minded to talk trade, nobody'll git leaded."

"Talk trade?" ejaculated the dumbfounded Kelly.

"Yep. You got one prisoner. We've got one. How 'bout an even swap?"

Bun Weaver felt a hollow, all-gone sensation in the pit of his stomach. The spokesman had said "We." Who could be their prisoner except the man who had ridden away with Jan or the girl herself?

"YOU—you got one of my men?" Thad Kelly was asking.

"Uh-huh. Sandy-complected feller. Calls himself Tex."

"Great Guns!" exploded Kelly. "That means—"

"They've got Jan, too!" cried Billy.

"Nope. She lit a shuck. From the way she was foggin', I don't reckon Mace Malden'll ever catch up to her. Hell, we've jawed a-plenty. The hombre we got is Tex. You've got Bun Weaver. Yuh'll swap even, huh, Kelly?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Diamond H riders, with rifles pointed straight at yuh, Thad Kelly."

"Diamond H riders!" thought Weaver. "Damned if I can place that voice. . . . Mace was with 'em. Wonder if Jan did get away? Humn, reckon no Diamond H man, except Mace, kin be proddy at me. None of 'em, not even Mace, kin know I'm suspicious of the whole layout."

"If yuh don't want to trade," the voice was going on, "we'll jest plunk a couple of lead slugs through old Tex here."

"But I do want to swap," Thad roared. To his companions he added in a lower voice: "We gotta save Tex, even if this Weaver does know too much, is damned dangerous to us."

"Fair enough," called the unseen spokesman. "But yuh got to agree to a few other things, Kelly. After we make the trade, you and all yore men are to stay right where yuh're at for one hour. Agree?

Kelly growled an oath deep in his corded throat.

"Yes!" he shouted.

"All right. Untie Weaver's hands so's he kin guide his hoss. As quick as he gits here a-top this hog-back, we'll send yore man down."

"Yuh got that backwards," flared Kelly. "I ain't even seen Tex yet. How do I know this ain't a trick?"

"They shore 'nuff has got me, Thad," the unmistakable voice of Tex Jarvis said. "But I ain't—" Abruptly he stopped.

"Send Tex down and I'll send up Weaver!" Kelly shouted.

"We'll let the prisoners meet half way," was the shouted reply.

Thad Kelly himself untied the Tin-cup cowboy's hands.

"Damn old Tex!" he growled. "Why'd he let hisself git nabbed?"

"I didn't aim to git nabbed either, but I was," Weaver said cheerfully.

This was a break! All afternoon he had been hoping to escape by some hook or crook or ruse. But no chance had presented itself and his captors were far too efficient to leave him unguarded or to forget to tie him properly.

"Thad," he said hurriedly, "I'm beggin' yuh to lay off and lie low. Give me a chance to ferret out somethin' I've got good reasons to think is damn rotten on this range. If I kin git to the bottom of the mess I'll report to you. How about it?"

"Git goin' to join yore friends!" harshly commanded Kelly.

Weaver shrugged, flexed his stiff arms, chafed his bruised wrists, picked up the bridle reins and slowly rode toward the little hogback. Another rider had appeared at the crest of the ridge and started down it. Meeting him, Weaver recognized Tex, hands tied to his saddle horn, a gag in his mouth.

The man was working his jaws, trying frantically to loosen that gag. Plainly he wanted to say something to Bun Weaver, who lifted his hand toward the gag.

"Don't you touch that hombre, Weaver!" came sharply from the rocks. "Come right on!"

AT this moment the bandanna holding Tex's gag in place slipped. Tex spat out the gag, gasped under his breath:

"They're after yore scalp. Be look—"

On the hogback a rifle flashed. A bullet pinged against a rock directly behind Tex's horse and the animal leaped ahead as if stung, carrying Tex on to the tensely waiting Kelly men.

Bun Weaver whipped his horse up the slope, thoughts sizzling in his mind. "'They're after yore scalp.' Who? I'm warned, but reckon it's best to ride straight to the fellers 'stead of tryin' to run. At such close range they could drop me dead easy!"

He passed over the crest of the knife-blade ridge and on the farther side saw two saddled horses. Two men arose from the rocks, moved toward the horses.

"We'll make hot tracks, Weaver," one of them snapped.

"Suits me," said the cowboy. "Mind yanking this hobble rope off my feet?"

"Leave it be for now. Tex'll tell Thad Kelly they was only two of us. Mebbe Kelly'll forgit his agreement, and smoke us up a-plenty."

They were up in their saddle, one on either side of Weaver, and riding. Half a mile had slipped past with no sound of pursuit before Bun Weaver asked the question uppermost in his mind.

"Did the girl shore git away from you two and Mace?"

"Did she!" Paley Jones chuckled. "Sent her hoss plumb over the top of Mace and my side partner here is sportin' a welt on his neck where her quirt bit him."

"Laugh, dang yuh!" growled Rutgears. "Anyhow, Mace'll foller her till he gits her. He was a mite anxious to meet up with you, too, Weaver."

"Yeah?" said Weaver, reaching down to untie the rope which passed under his horse's belly and hobbled his feet together.

"Let it alone!" commanded Paley Jones, slapping the cowboy sharply on the ear.

Weaver straightened in his saddle. The blow had started his bruised head to aching again. It also proved the truth of what Tex had tried to tell the Tincup cowboy.

"Are you jiggers shore 'nuff Diamond H riders?" he asked quietly. "I can't place yuh."

"I was in the first ruckus on the Longhorn," Paley answered. "You was jest a spindlin' kid then and likely I've changed quite some. Jest come back from Texas where I'd changed my name to Paley Jones. Had 'nother one hereabouts."

Weaver could not withhold a sharp whistle of sheer amazement. In the darkness and after twelve years he had not recognized the man, but at mention of this name, all Thad Kelly had said about Paley Jones came to mind. Now Weaver remembered the tall, slender rider. Sid Atwell!

"Seems that name meant somethin' to you, Weaver," Paley Jones said slyly. "Reckon I savvy why. Yuh was Thad Kelly's prisoner. Probably the old hoss thief told yuh 'bout his pleasant experience in Texas."

CHAPTER XV

Two to One

EVEN though there was still no indication of pursuit, Jones and Rutgears had not slackened their pace. Inasmuch as they were heading directly for the ridge trail north of Crazy Creek, Weaver realized these fellows, with Mace Malden, must have found that trail by tracking his horse and the one Janet Kelly had ridden when he and Jan had come up that ridge early this morning.

"Uh-huh, Thad did snort some," he told Paley. "But he had already signed the man up; conceit seemed to be an important part of Paley's make-up. Just as well to play on that."

"Yeah," he repeated, "Kelly had a locoed yarn about bein' framed. Hell, no man alive would be smart enough

to git an innocent man dead to rights as slick as Thad Kelly said this job was done."

Paley Jones rose to the bait. "Wouldn't, huh? You kin bet yore life 'twas smart. And yuh're lookin' at the man who thought up the scheme and put it across."

Taut nerves twitched Weaver's cheeks. Thad's story of one of the rawest, most contemptible deals ever handed a man was true!

"Hell!" scoffed the Tincup cowboy. "Next yuh'll be tellin' me that the Longhorn ranchers, scairt Thad'd come back, paid yuh for gittin' him put away in the Rock House."

"One of 'em did. The rest—Heck, twelve years ago they didn't have sense enough to look ahead. 'Cept this one rancher. He's a damned smart, far-seein' hombre, smarter even'n I am."

"So—o? But I'll bet it was you, Jones, that thought of slippin' down to Texas and layin' for Thad Kelly."

"Nope, 'twasn't. I was shore Thad Kelly'd died in these mountains. But Malden wasn't takin' no chances."

"Ain't you talkin' too much, Paley?" Ab Rutgears put in gruffly. "Anyhow, we gotta ride single file along the rim o' this cliff. That'll stop some of yore chin music."

"Keep yore flat nose outa my business, Ab," Paley retorted. "Weaver'll never git a chance to tell whatever he hears from me. Reckon mebbe he's caught on by now how he's jumped outa the fry-pan into the fire."

"No!" ejaculated Weaver, as if this was indeed news to him.

How could he turn the tables? He had full use of his hands, but his hobbled feet prevented his leaping from his saddle to vanish over a cut-bank or into heavy brush. Maybe he could untie that foot rope while they were riding single file!

No such luck. Rutgears rode ahead of the Tincup cowboy; Paley Jones behind, his Colt in his right fist. "I kin see tolerable good in the dark, Weaver," he said meaningly. "You bend to git at that hobble and I'll shore let yuh have it. . . . We coulda picked yuh off with a rifle when we found yuh with Thad Kelly. We'd had orders to kill that Texan, too, but hadn't done it by the time we sighted Kelly. 'Twas me thought of how to git hold of you."

The horses had slowed to a walk along the dangerous trail. Weaver screwed his head around to speak.

"YUH'RE smarter'n I thought, Jones. Still it seems to me yuh had a plumb good chance to plunk a couple of bullets into Kelly and end this war. Without a leader, the rest of that bunch'd—"

"The time wasn't ripe for that sort of a play. You don't savvy what I mean, probably never will—'less old Diamond H hisself tells you. We was s'posed to jest shoot yuh, but we're takin' yuh to him."

"That's fine!" lied Bun, an icy wave running down his backbone. 'Course I had a kinda misunderstandin' with Mace. But that kin be patched up when I see Diamond H."

"I'll give it to yuh straight, Weaver." Paley's teeth gleamed with the man's evil smile. "Mebbe yuh don't re'lize it, but yuh've upset the old man's calculations somethin' terrible."

"I've upset— Hey, yuh're barkin' up the wrong tree. Why I'm the hombre that drew first blood for our side in this ruckus. I had to kill Thad Kelly's hired bushwhacker."

Though he spoke casually, Weaver waited tensely. Would he learn now the truth about that scar-faced killer? The man Thad Kelly had denied knowing, had fiercely denied having hired?

"Huh? That's what *you* think," Paley snarled.

Rutgears hipped around in his saddle. "Keep yere face shut, fool!"

But the Tincup cowboy had learned enough. Thad Kelly had not lied! The

killer was not Thad's man. Whose then? The answer leaped at Bun Weaver—Malden's!

As the three rode onward, drawing nearer to the ridge north of Crazy Creek, Weaver grew more certain that if these two gun hands took him to the Diamond H he would not live out the night. If he attempted to dash away, hot lead would reach him before he could kick his lazy nag to a gallop. And with his hobbled feet—

Then suddenly it came to him that the hobble might prove a help instead of a hinderance. A help because it would be sure to hold him astride his horse while he—

The plan was scarcely formulated before it was put into execution. Here lay a stretch of open country and Paley Jones at Bun's right, was riding stirrup to stirrup with the Tincup cowboy; Rutgears at his left. The rifles of both men were scabbarded on their saddles. Neither had his Colt in hand.

Stealthily Weaver looped his bridle reins loosely around his saddle horn and then, with the swiftness of light, his right arm clamped around Paley's waist, pinioning the man's gun hand to his side; his left closed around the bull-like neck of Ab Rutgears.

Muffled yells; lurid oaths; two snorting horses whirling aside. Two saddles emptied; two scared horses streaking down the trail. A third horse—Weaver's—snorting, kicking, plunging crazily, for on either side of the animal human figures dangled.

THE moment he had emptied the saddles, though, Weaver realized he'd tackled a couple of human wildcats. Paley had managed to throw his free arm around the Tincup cowboy's neck, choking him. Rutgears was clawing at him with both hands, ripping the shirt from his body, taking skin with it. And certainly the powerful man would have wrenched Weaver from the saddle had not his feet been hobbled together.

Abruptly Weaver released his grip on Rutgears, and the fellow hit the ground, turning end over end. With the unguided horse, running wildly now, Weaver turned his savage fury upon Paley Jones. He tore the man's arm from his neck and drove his fist to Paley's nose. Somehow then, though Weaver had no intention of releasing the man, Paley squirmed free, dropped into the sage.

Behind the Tincup cowboy a scant thirty or forty yards, Rutgears had picked himself up. His Colt was roaring.

Bun Weaver ducked low and fled for his life. Fled after the two "spooked" horses. Had it not been for trailing bridle reins he could not have caught up with them. But with that handicap he swiftly overhauled the riderless animals. When he had finally caught them both he untied the hobble rope on his feet.

The cowboy stepped down, jerked the men's rifles from their saddle scabbards, pumped all the cartridges from the magazine of one rifle and thrust them in his pockets. Quickly looking to see that the second weapon was fully loaded and with it in hand, he led all three horses over to a cluster of pines at his left and tied them. He could hear the comments and curses of the two discomfited killers.

"We shore misfigured that young hell-twister!" Rutgears was yelping. "Never entered my noodle he'd try any such trick!"

"And git away with it, too!" rasped Paley. "I've been in all kinds of mix-ups, but this is the first time I even knowed of a man with his feet hobbled together under his hoss's belly gittin' plumb clean away from two husky armed fellers. Settin' 'em afoot to boot."

"Only thing for us to do is hoof it to the Diamond H," growled Rutgears, and he cursed some more.

They were clumping toward Weaver.

They didn't expect to be surprised! He crouched behind a boulder, the rifle cocked. Out of the darkness loomed the two men. Weaver let them get within four yards before he lashed out his whiplike command:

"Grab stars in both fists!"

As if their boots had suddenly become glued to the ground, they stopped. Paley's arms leaped upward. Not so Ab Rutgears'. All in a sliced second, his Colt cleared leather. He fired from the hip and his bullet, whistling above the rock, singed Bun Weaver's left ear.

Instantly flame leaped from the muzzle of Weaver's rifle. As he levered in a fresh shell he saw Rutgears fire once more, wildly, before the dark earth caught his body.

Paley Jones, arms stretched above his head, was as motionless as a tree.

"Oblige me by kicking that jigger's smoker outa his fist," Weaver snapped to Jones. "Mebbe he's playin' possum."

"He's dead," snarled Paley, but he kicked the Colt from Rutgears' hand.

TWO minutes later Weaver, having assured himself that Rutgears was in fact dead, had Paley Jones securely hog-tied.

"You care to answer me a few questions?" he asked.

Conceited braggart though he was, however, Paley Jones could take defeat without whining or begging for mercy. Glaring defiance, he retorted:

"Seems like I talked too much a'ready."

Suddenly from the direction in which he had just come, Weaver caught the sound of muffled hoofbeats. Many riders were coming this way. Undoubtedly Thad Kelly's crew, he thought. However, he could linger here a few moments more.

"Where's the rest of Malden's crew?" he demanded.

"Dunno," said Paley. "Me and Ab only drifted in last night. I've been in Texas ever since I left here twelve years ago."

"Yeah?" Weaver was skeptical. "Has Malden hired a lot more gunhands like you two sidewinders?"

Paley hunched his shoulders. "I shore dunno."

"And yuh don't know where his old regular cowboys are? Don't know if they've gone up north after a bunch of cattle, like they're sayin'? Where's Flash Malden and Nevada Ed, Malden's foreman?"

"Yuh wastin' time, Weaver. I dunno the answers. Strikes me we'd better be driftin' 'fore Thad Kelly gits here."

An ironical, merciless smile played on Weaver's tight lips.

"Jones, who the blazes made out he was Bill Kelly to collect that debt? Who got the dinero?"

"I tell yuh I've been in Texas," Jones said doggedly. "No savvy what yuh're drivin' at. . . . Let's git away from here, Weaver. You shore ain't going to let Kelly git his claws on yuh agin!"

"Hardly. But Thad'll be mighty pleased to hook his claws in *you!*"

Paley Jones' face changed color; his eyes dilated with stark fear. "You ain't figgerin'—"

"Whatever Thad Kelly hands you is comin' to yuh. Why, yuh contemptible snake, 'twould been kinder to have shot Kelly dead than to got a man like him sent to the pen. . . . I'm goin' to write a note to Thad—and I hope what I say'll go a long way toward straightenin' out this hellish mess."

No mercy in him, Weaver left Paley Jones in the scrubby sage brush, wrote his brief message and fastened it to the saddle of one of the horses. Selecting the best of the three animals as his mount, he led the other two over near Paley Jones and turned the two horses so that each faced toward the other's tail. He looped the bridle reins of each horse over the saddle horn of the other, thus tying them together so that they could not run away. All they could do was to turn around in short circles.

Steadily the sound of hoofs was growing louder. Then the rattle of spurs and bits and faint squeak of saddle leather.

Weaver looked at Paley Jones, expecting the man to break. But Jones glared back at the cowboy with murderous hatred in his pale eyes. For one moment Weaver knew indecision. It was hellish, what Thad Kelly would do to this snake-in-the-grass.

Nevertheless, Bun Weaver steeled himself, swung up to the saddle on the good horse Paley had been riding, and rode slowly down the ridge. Slowly, so that his going might not attract immediate pursuit.

He was bound for the Diamond H ranch on a mission which would have astounded his neighbors. He hoped to capture and take off that ranch old Diamond H Malden himself!

CHAPTER XVI

Branded a Traitor

QUICKLY following the exchange of prisoners, Thad Kelly, his crew and Billy Kelly learned from Tex Jarvis how he had dismally failed to take Jan out of danger, and how the man who had just put across this trade with Kelly was none other than Paley Jones, aided by tough-nut Ab Rutgears.

The Kelly followers had expected their own boss to hit out immediately after Jones; expecting that this once Thad Kelly would go back on his word, the promise he had blindly given. Yet, although his seamed face showed the strain — the strain of a strong man within striking distance of his bitterest enemy who nevertheless felt bound by honor not to strike at this moment— Thad Kelly said:

"I know what yuh're all a-thinkin', boys. But, damn it all, I made an agreement with that pair of reptiles and my hands are tied for one hour."

Several hard-bitten fellows snorted their protests. Tex Jarvis was the most wrathful of all.

"Thad, spite of what yuh promised, yuh hadn't ought to pass up no chance to git that Paley Jones rattler. They're Malden men, them two killers, and though I don't savvy what's bitin' on 'em or on Mace Malden concernin' Bun Weaver, I know they aim to gun that young cowboy.

"Huh?" ejaculated Billy. In spite of Weaver being a Longhorn rancher, Billy "kinda liked that jigger." "He's on the same side as Mace Malden. Why should they want to kill him?"

"I'd like to know the answer, too, Billy," said old Thad. "Don't know 'bout the rest of you men, but I was kinda forced to admire that young heller."

Four echoed this sentiment; a fifth man said:

"The plumb nervy way he took our stole dogies away from us, anybody'd have to say he's got plenty sand."

Thad Kelly sat on a rock with his watch in his hand while the minutes of the hour he had agreed to sit tight ticked slowly past. Suddenly the night air carried the distant sound of riders on the move.

"It ain't Big Foot Ben that made the false trail," announced "Spiffy" Johns after minutes of listening . "It's a big bunch of hossmen."

"Big bunch, yeh," said Kelly. "It's them snorty ranchers, 'course." He swore in annoyance. "Somehow they got wise. Spiffy, you ride out a piece and see if they're headin' straight our way. If they are we'll make a stand on yon li'l hogback that was so useful to my friend, Paley Jones."

Spiffy returned soon, reporting,

"They'll pass a little ways north of us. They're headin' for the same trail outa these mountains we was headed for, Thad . . . Why don't we s'prise 'em, shoot hell outa them?"

"Plain suicide for us," retorted Kelly. "We got to git them fellers at a powerful disadvantage 'fore we jump 'em. Hold your hosses' noses and don't make a sound, men."

"Mebbe it's lucky for us they are gittin' ahead of us on this trail," Billy whispered to Tex. "Otherwise we'd been attackin' the Diamond H and they'da come up behind us—"

"And mowed down the hull kit and caboodle of us," grunted Tex sourly.

"Quiet," ordered Thad in an undertone.

DISTINCTLY they heard the ranchers passing them north of the small hogback; even heard some low-spoken words. Presently the Longhornmen were gone on toward the ridge trail north of Crazy Creek. When the sound of their horses' hoofs died to a faint murmur, Thad Kelly announced:

"We'll trail along after 'em for a spell. Mebbe we'll trail 'em out to open country, see where they go, then strike a ranch nobody's a-guardin'."

Like phantoms they followed in the wake of the ranchers, though far enough behind not to be heard. It was not long thereafter that they heard exploding guns from down country.

"One six-shooter whammin' away," snorted Thad Kelly. "Hell! Shouldn't wonder but what Bun Weaver has made a break and Paley or his pard is a-smokin' him up."

Again those distant guns began to talk. Only two shots this time.

"A rifle and a six spoke mighty nigh together, son," Thad commented to Billy. "Could yuh tell 'em apart?"

"No, Uncle Thad. I ain't never been in no war till now. What yuh think happened?"

Thad Kelly shook his grizzled head, called to a rough-hewn fellow, dubbed "Hawk" (who the others said could see in the dark) to take the lead, riding well in advance of the rest of the band. To the highly-keyed young Billy it seemed hours before Hawk came back and tensely whispered:

"Open country just ahead and the ranchers have stopped. I could barely make out a couple o' hosses tied together. That's what stopped the ranchers. They're all bunched up around them hosses. Somebody want to go with me, afoot, an' see what we kin find out?"

"Let me go, Uncle Thad," pleaded Billy.

Thad nodded, and Billy, thrilled to his toes, silently, warily followed in the footsteps of swarthy Hawk. As they drew near to the halted ranchers, they dropped to all fours, creeping along through the sagebrush. At last Hawk lay flat on his stomach, Billy beside him; both lifting their heads to look through the tops of sagebrush clumps.

"Have they found Bun Weaver's dead body?" wondered Billy, and the thought made him sick. "Or what?"

"Here's a scrap of paper I found on the saddle on one of them hosses," they heard a rancher say. Do we dast light matches to read it?"

"We'll take a chance."

A match flamed, and Billy saw the weather-beaten, bearded face of Sam McNulty, whom he had seen at the Diamond H last night, bent over the paper. McNulty read aloud:

> Thad Kelly: You'll recognize this coyote. Only Malden knew of the dirt he did you in Texas. None of the rest of us did. He's all yours. Bush up at the Tincup and give me a chance to clear up a few matters. Before day cracks I hope to bring you Malden himself. Bun Weaver.

"What kin it mean?" asked Leckenby. "Did Bun Weaver write it?"

"Shore he did," spoke up Paley Jones glibly. "It proves what I've been trying to tell you fellers. All yuh old-

timers know me; know I fought on yore side with Malden twelve years ago. I was Sid Atwell in them days, but after I went to Texas I had certain reasons for changin' my name to Paley Jones."

BILLY started so violently that Hawk laid a restraining hand on his arm. Young Kelly was beginning to understand this situation. Bun Weaver had escaped from Paley Jones and—

"Why you go to Texas?" Leckenby was demanding. "What'd yuh do to Thad Kelly down there?"

"I'll tell yuh all about it later," Paley said, offhandedly. "The point right now is, you fellers are 'way behind on up-to-the-minute happenin's in this ruckus. As I've already said, Malden musta heard that Thad Kelly was on his way to the Longhorn. Anyhow, old Diamond H sent for me, askin' me to bring along a good man. So I brought Rutgears. But that double-crossin' Bun Weaver killed him. We landed at the Diamond H only last night—after midnight—and the girl, Jan Kelly, had lit out."

"Huh?" clipped McNulty. "That's news. But I ain't sorry to hear it. Us old-timers didn't like the idea of holdin' her."

"Mace fogged in," Paley continued. "He'd met and stopped the girl, and Bun Weaver took her away from him. Mace took me and Rutgears, hit out after her and Weaver, trailed 'em into these mountains, found they'd got to Thad Kelly's bandits all right." He held up a hand.

"Hold yore questions, you fellers. I'm tellin' it to yuh straight. Thad sent the girl away with one old codger, and the three of us nabbed that fellow. The girl give us the slip, Mace lightin' out after her. Now me and Rutgears figgered to take the man we'd caught to Diamond H. But that double-danged Bun Weaver, who'd stayed with Thad Kelly—he's in with Kelly hand and glove—musta decided to go back to the Longhorn so's to see what the set-up was and tip Kelly off.

"Anyhow, me and Rutgears run into him right here at this place. He was hid behint a rock and started shootin' without warnin', droppin' Rutgears immejit. Not knowin' but what we'd run into a half-dozen renegades, I h'isted my paws and was grabbed alive. Then Bun Weaver turned our prisoner loose, a man called Tex, and told him to high-tail to Kelly. Which he done, pronto."

"Then Weaver hog-tied yuh and left yuh here?" McNulty asked incredulously.

"He shore did, expectin' his pard, Thad Kelly, to pick me up. He told me the outlaws was headed this way; left that note for Kelly to find. All o' yuh kin see what he figgered to do—git hold of Diamond H hisself and turn him over to Thad Kelly."

"Is that danged sidewinder puttin' Bun in a tight spot!" Billy gritted, almost aloud.

Grizzled old Jerome Leckenby burst into profanity. But if Weaver was a traitor some things he had done didn't tally. For example, last night he had warned the ranchers of an ambush at Cougar Canyon.

"Hell!" scoffed Paley Jones. "Weaver thought Thad Kelly'd hang me. Bragged about that last night's business. What he done was to save Kelly's bandits from bein' wiped out. They hadn't set no trap so you fellers coulda s'prised 'em plumb!"

ONCE more the ranchers looked slant-eyed at each other. Once again Bun Weaver might have lied to them. But since Paley Jones knew so much, did he know who'd stampeded the cattle Kelly had stolen and sent them down Cougar Canyon today? This being news to Jones, he replied that he did not know.

Leckenby wanted still another point cleared up. Bun Weaver's Tincup ranch had been burned, his cattle stolen, his hired man murdered, and Weaver himself had said he'd shot Kelly's drygulcher. Surely if Weaver and Kelly had been in cahoots, Kelly would not have done these things; nor would Thad Kelly's hired killer have been lying in wait for Bun Weaver.

Paley Jones' ingenuity to lie readily was little short of marvelous.

"'Twas all a smoke screen to pull the wool over yore eyes, men," he hesitated. Can't yuh see how a man on the inside is the most valuable ally Kelly could have? And Bun Weaver is playing for high stakes. What's the burnin' of his dinky ranch buildin's amount to when he expects to git the Diamond H for hisself?

"If his place is burned, his cattle run off, his cowboy killed, that's to prove to his neighbors he's being hit hard. I'll bet yuh Bun Weaver's cowboy was gunned because he was honest and wouldn't play the game any other way."

Heads wagged at this plausible sounding statement.

"But about that drygulcher?" Jerome Leckenby persisted.

"Hell!" snorted Paley. "Have any of yuh seen this hombre's body? Any of yuh see Weaver kill him? . . . . I thunk not. They wasn't no such dry gulchers."

And Paley Jones could speak so confidently because he was certain the cowmen would not find Scar Sellers' body before daylight this morning, Paley himself, with Ab Rutgears and Mace Malden, had placed the drygulcher's body in an almost bottomless cleft between huge rock piles.

"I'm satisfied, men," said Jerome Leckenby in a brittle tone.

Dell Floyd expelled a gusty sigh. "I'd never have believed it of young Bun Weaver," he said sadly. "But the case agin him is dead open and shut. . . . . Paley, is there a trail down this ridge? We s'pected there was 'cause we knew Bun must have got from his Tincup ranch up into the mountains last night."

"They ain't no trail, but yuh kin git up or down this ridge, yes," said Paley. "But hold on! If yuh're figgerin' to ramble to the Diamond H and grab Bun Weaver, that's my chore. Mine, savvy? After what he done to me and my partner I want that hombre myself. What's more I'm damn shore Thad Kelly is headed this way. The note Bun left confirms it.

"I don't want to be actin' bossy, but why don't yuh lay a trap for the damn bunch of bandits, wind up this war right tonight? I'll git Bun Weaver. Don't nobody ever doubt it!"

"The way you say that I'm dead sure you will get him, Jones—Atwell," said McNulty. "Somebody give him a gun. Git goin', Paley. Who knows what that locoed double-crosser'll mebbe do to with no help to speak of on his ranch? Well, how 'bout layin' that ambush, boys?"

THE cowboys and ranchers all approved.

In the scrubby sagebrush, Hawk's hand gripped Billy's shoulder, and then Hawk was crawling stealthily away. Billy followed, strange thoughts buzzing in his youthful mind. When at length he was again in the midst of Kelly's band he told his uncle:

"That Paley Jones could show tricks to the devil hisself."

Hawk's report was brief and to the point; Thad Kelly's decision upon hearing it was prompt.

"Boys, we ain't goin' to spring that trap. We're cuttin' 'cross the range and leavin' these mountains by way of Cougar Canyon, since that's the only other trail we know to git out to the Longhorn River. And we're headin' for the Diamond H!"

Riding between Thad Kelly and Tex

Jarvis, Billy repeated every word of the conversation he had heard. The message Weaver had written and left along with Paley Jones for Kelly to pick up, Billy quoted three times.

"Know what I think?" he concluded. "I think there's somethin' powerful rotten somethin' none of his neighbors know. But Bun Weaver has got onto the slippery, dirt-mean old skunk."

Thad Kelly, wrapped in a brooding silence, merely nodded.

CHAPTER XVII

Vulnerable Spot

GLAD YUH got back safe to the ranch, Miss Kelly," said Diamond H Malden, his voice suave and mocking.

He stood at the door of his living room with the lamplight behind him, watching Snip half-carry the tired girl from her horse to the house.

Diamond H closed the door. "Ho, Stella," he called and when the huge, stolid woman appeared; "take this young lady to her room and search her. From top to toes, savvy?"

Big Stella nodded and took Jan's arm. "Come along, girl."

Climbing the wide stairs, Jan heard Malden speaking to his son Mace.

"Tell me everything. But first, who'd she see?"

The room to which Stella led Jan was the same she had occupied a part of the previous night, which seemed so long ago. She felt as if years had passed since she had first arrived at this ranch.

Her wind-reddened eyes noted how a hasp, which could be padlocked, had been fitted to the outside of her door, and when Stella had lighted the kerosene lamp, Jan saw that iron bars, also, had been placed across her window.

The woman turned. "He said to search you."

Jan sank on the bed. "It'll do no good, Stella. I'm so tired. Go away and let me sleep."

"Shuck outa your duds," returned the imperturbable housekeeper. "I got to look in your stockings and boots and everything."

"All right," said Jan, too weary longer to protest.

She was too tired even to worry about what was in store for her. She was far more concerned about her uncle and Billy and also about Bun Weaver. Had those two killers who had been with Mace found the Tincup cowboy? This day a-top the mountain range? And where was Ormond Van Ormond, her friend?

Big Stella's search was painstaking, but at last she stood back, plainly dissatisfied.

"He'll be mad as heck," she remarked.

"He knows by now that I've seen my uncle," Jan sighed. "So he won't expect you to find that note on me. . . . Stella, have you heard anything about —about Bun Weaver?"

"No. It's after midnight, but I'll get you somethin' to eat." The woman went out, locked the door behind her.

Jan moved over to the washstand and poured water into the basin. The feel of it on her face and hands was refreshing. Then an imperative rap came at her door.

"If yuh're dressed, Miss Kelly," said Diamond H Malden's voice, "come to the livin' room. I want to talk to yuh. I'm leavin' the door unlocked."

Jan opened her lips to say defiantly, "I'm not coming," and thought better of it. Perhaps she might learn the answers to a few of the questions crowding her mind.

"All right," she answered.

A few minutes later Jan paused at the foot of the stairs, saw Diamond H Malden standing alone in his great living room. In the bright light the white of his hair, the white of his bushy eyebrows, the almost benign expression of his face were accentuated.

"No wonder his neighbors trust him when he looks so sort of fatherly like that," the girl thought. "I wonder if they'll ever learn what he really is."

She crossed to a chair, into which she sank gracefully.

"Well, I'm here."

BIG STELLA entered with a tray of food, placed it on the girl's lap and went out again. Jan sampled the steaming coffee and began to eat. Malden, who had been tramping the floor, suddenly wheeled in front of her, rubbing his hands together.

"I reckon yuh know we had to bring yuh back," he said softly. "Too bad, but when this business is all settled I'm shore yuh'll thank me."

Jan said nothing aloud, but under her breath: "Trying to soft soap me, is he? That note certainly has him bothered!"

"What I want to talk to yuh about now," Malden said, "is what yuh'll mebbe see fit to do after this thing's over. I'm sorry we couldn't git yore uncle to put a halt to his plumb, unwarranted and wicked course."

"You big liar!" thought Jan. "How I wish my brain wasn't so tired. I'll have to be on my guard against this wily old he-wolf. No doubt he thinks he can twist me around his finger, or trap me or tangled me up. Perhaps he can, too. He's old and wise, experienced and cunning, while I—"

The man's purring voice went on:

"Since we failed to git peace now, we've gotta defend ourselves. But it is yore own predicament I want to talk about, Miss Kelly. Not knowin' the law, mebbe yuh don't realize jest how yuh've got yoreself all bogged down in trouble."

"Oh yes, I do," said Jan. "You're the law in this neck of the woods. I've defied you, so—"

"I'm meanin' the reg'lar authority," Malden interrupted, smiling only with his lips. "Twelve years ago there wasn't no such authority here, for the West was new and young and raw—the frontier. But now, no farther away than Cragmont, we've got a good sheriff, a judge, a court and—"

"I'd hoped to reach that sheriff and get him on the job," Jan put in with spirit. "You wouldn't have liked that."

"Yuh're wrong there, Miss Kelly, I'da been glad if yuh'd got the sheriff. It's you, yoreself, yere outlaw uncle and yore other allies, who've deliberately placed yoreselves outside the law."

Jan swallowed hard. Certainly Thad Kelly had placed himself outside the law. But had she, herself? No. Doubtless her best defense against Malden would be silence.

"Yuh're mighty young," Malden resumed. "So mebbe yuh'd didn't know yuh was a party to this swindlin' and extortion plot."

The girl forgot her determination to remain silent.

"Swindling? Extortion?" she exclaimed. "What are you talking about?"

"Yuh kin make out yuh're surprised right well, Miss Kelly. I suspected exactly what was in the wind even before the feller that was in with yuh talked."

"Who was in with me?"

"That hombre that calls hisself Ormond Van Ormond. It wasn't jest chance that Van Ormond got to Last Stand on the same stage with you and yore brother, and come with yuh to the Diamond H."

"It was so far as I know," said Jan simply. She met Malden's disconcerting gaze squarely. "Mr. Van Ormond was a stranger to me and Billy."

"No, no, hardly a stranger," said Malden. "Yuh see, he's already told

me the details of this plot against the ranchers of the Longhorn. The ones at the head of that plot are Miss Janet Kelly, Ormond Van Ormond and Thad Kelly."

FORGETTING her meal, Jan stared blankly at the great, white-haired man, wondering whether to believe her own ears.

"Thad Kelly had returned from Texas with a crew of outlaws—gunmen and killers," Malden said grimly. "He was to move into the mountains and at the proper time raid our ranches and kill our men. Yore part was to write letters to all of us demandin' payment of a note. When yuh got our replies, statin' that this debt had been paid—as yuh well knew—yuh was to mail threats to each of us. This part yuh carried out."

"I've mailed no threats to anybody!" declared the girl staunchly.

"No-o? What do yuh call this?" From his coat pocket Malden drew a letter. "The writing is jest the same as in the other letter I got earlier. Both letters are signed by name. This one says: 'Since yuh have not replied to my first letter I'll let yuh know Thad Kelly is back to collect by force.' That's a threat, Miss Kelly, and to send threats through the United States mails is a penitentiary offence."

Jan opened her lips and closed them again. Of what use to deny to Malden that she had written those particular letters—forgeries? Who had written them? She did not know.

Suddenly she recalled having heard only this evening that Harris Clark, postmaster of Nugget, had committed suicide. What possible motive could this old fellow have had for such an act? Abruptly it came to her that he was the one man who most certainly could have told who had mailed those forged letters! This thought immediately led to another. Had the postmaster actually committed suicide—or had be been *murdered?*

"The next step of this extortion plot was simple," Malden was saying. "You and yore kid brother and Van Ormond, who was to seem to be a stranger to yuh and bound on another mission, came to the Longhorn, hopin' that the ranchers would be so bad scared by Thad Kelly that they would agree to yore demands, pay cash to call off the Kelly rustlers and killers. These ranchers, though, my neighbors, ain't so easily bluffed. They've risen in righteous wrath to—"

"Mr. Malden," Janet said steadily, "all this about my having anything to do with a swindling plot is too ridiculous for words."

"Wrong agin, Miss Kelly. We've got a sound legal case against you personally. I am pointin' out jest what a desperate predicament yuh've got yoreself into."

"I know I'm in a predicament, but I didn't place myself there willingly, Mr. Malden," she said resentfully.

"If, after the war is over, I let yuh go back to yore home, will yuh still feel yuh got a grievance?" Diamond H asked.

"Certainly I'll still have a grievance, as you put it," Jan answered sharply.

"And yuh might go to law tryin' to collect the debt?"

"Yes."

"Think that over mighty careful, Miss Kelly," Malden spoke as if to a stubborn child with whom he was patiently trying to reason. "I am a kindly man at heart, the last man in the world to want to see any harm come to a beautiful young girl with her life still ahead of her. Think of yore family, too—yore mother, sisters, yore proddy young brother, and how much yuh mean to 'em."

He sighed heavily, studying the girl.

"I SEE I must make myself plumb clear. Yuh're my guest until this second war on the Longhorn is

ended. Then whether or not yuh'll be allowed to go back home depends on jest how yuh act. It would be loco for yuh to start a lawsuit. For I kin and will prove that the original note has been paid in full to yore father, Bill Kelly. I also kin prove that Thad Kelly stepped outside the law to raid our ranches, burn our buildin's, steal cattle and horses and commit cold-blooded murder. Last, and most important to you, Miss Kelly, should this matter ever be brought up in court, I kin prove that you sent threats through the United States mails. That's all I've got to say on this subject now."

The nonplused girl felt that he had certainly had enough to say. And good heavens! Malden held all the winning cards. Yet she was too weary, numbed and beaten to fight back now. She brought her aching body erect, placed the supper tray on the table, watching Diamond H Malden walking about the room with his head bent and his hands clasped behind his back.

"Are you all through with me?" she asked quietly.

"No. I've got to say that jest because yuh're a young and pretty woman, yuh've come to be quite a problem here in the stronghold of yore enemies. 'Twoulda been better all around and simpler if yuh'd stayed at home."

"Also safer for me," said Jan.

"Yes. Mace, the young idiot, would marry yuh if I'd let him. Thinks it'd be a good way to keep your mouth shut."

"To keep my mouth shut? Why, you've just shown me I haven't a chance of collecting the debt by law. But if ever I get clear of this ranch I'll—"

"Yuh'll be right careful what yuh say." Malden smiled one of his hateful smiles. "Yuh've gotta agree to certain conditions or yore life—"

"I'm not so much interested in saving my own life as I am in saving Billy and Uncle Thad and—" Jan stopped. She was thinking also of Ormond Van Ormond and Bun Weaver. What horrible fate was in store for them if Malden won this war?

"The ranchers are too aroused for even me to save Thad Kelly from their vengeance," said Damond H. "Yore brother'll be spared, though, provided yuh truthfuly answer me certain questions."

"I—I'll see if I can aswer them truthfully, Mr. Malden."

"Do yuh still think Frank Newhouse was doubecrossin' yuh last night?"

"Yes."

"He wasn't, but we kin clear that up later. Now . . . Who helped yuh to escape? If there's a traitor among my men I must know it."

Jan could not help starting violently. Evidently Malden did not know who had helped her. But what would happen to Van Ormond if she told what he had done? She looked steadily into Diamond H's fiercely gleaming eyes.

"Next question," she said.

MALDEN thrust his heavy face forward. "Miss Kelly, when there's a bloody, ruthless range war goin' on some bad accidents kin happen. Shorely yuh don't want yore brother's body or yore own sent home to yore mother and sisters inside a wooden box. . . . *Who helped you?*"

The terrible threat was put so brutally that Jan turned white, though she shook her dark head with all the Kelly stubbornness and defiance.

Stamping his feet, Malden took another turn around the room. Then mastering himself, he again faced Janet Kelly.

"Not that this matters—for the thing is plumb worthless—but where's the note yuh took from the steer's horn in the old cabin?"

"That I can answer," Janet said. "I lost it."

"Where?"

"I have no idea."

"You're not lyin'?"

"No."

"Yore ally, Van Ormond, opened my safe last night," Malden said grimly. "Did he give yuh any paper and letters to take away?"

"He did not. And he isn't my ally. Did you see him open your safe?"

"*I'm* askin' the questions, Miss Kelly," Malden said sternly.

Jan managed to smile tantalizingly. "Of course. But why ask me about anything Mr. Van Ormond may or may not have done?"

"Miss Kelly, there's no hope of yore saving Van Ormond's life by keepin' information from me. He's already been shot."

The room seemed to whirl around in front of the girl's eyes. She put one hand to her suddenly tight throat and sank limply into a chair.

Towering above her, Malden resumed: "I'll admit now that part of what I have told yuh wasn't so. I said Van Ormond talked. He did not, and that's my present trouble. Listen to me, Miss Kelly! Did yuh know that man 'fore yuh rode to Last Stand on the stage with him?"

"I have told you he was a complete stranger!" she said calmly.

"So far as yuh know, he ain't—wasn't—a lawman? You didn't hire him to come with yuh to the Diamond H to help yuh?"

"Lawman?" thought Jan. "I wonder." Aloud she said: "I know nothing about him and I certainly didn't get him to come here."

Suddenly Malden's suavity dropped from him.

"Damn the nosey, meddlin' safe-cracker anyhow!" he swore. Then: "Miss Kelly, I'll come out flat-footed. Van Ormond, at least that's what we think, took important papers from my safe. Papers I've got to git back. We believe he's the man that helped yuh git away from this ranch last night, too.

"Since he's dead yuh can't either harm or help him by tellin' me if he did. Did he hand yuh a packet of letters?"

Pausing, he drilled the girl's face with his flintlike eyes. She replied quietly.

"I can only say that Mr. Van Ormond told me nothing about any papers. I do not know where they are. As for who helped me leave the Diamond H, I'm not going to implicate anybody."

Malden gritted an oath. "How stubborn all you Kellys are! Think this over tonight, young woman. Unless I git them letters back neither you nor yore brother, to say nothin' of Thad Kelly, will ever leave the Longhorn alive."

JAN did not flinch. She was beyond that stage. Strangely there came to her mind the fable of Achilles' heel, his vulnerable spot.

With cool defiance in her voice she remarked:

"How I would have liked to congratulate Mr. Van Ormond. He evidently found your vulnerable spot."

Malden favored her with a crooked, evil smile.

"You kin go to yore room. I still believe you and Van Ormond was workin' together—and mebbe I'll find *yore* vulnerable spot, Miss Kelly."

He stood watching the girl ascend the stairs. Halfway up she paused and turned and saw the living room door opening soundlessly. A man slid through that door and gently closed it. His voice rang out sharply.

"Freeze in yore tracks, Malden!"

Until then Jan had not recognized the intruder with his dirty, torn trousers, old blue jumper, and black slouch hat that half hid his face. But the voice was one she knew; a voice she loved. It sent electric thrills racing along her taut nerves, for it was the voice of Bun Weaver!

CHAPTER XVIII

The Darkest Hour

MOTIONLESS in every other respect, Diamond H Malden lifted his arms. "The smart young hombre from the Tincup," he remarked calmly. "How did you git here? Some of my men have been mighty, mighty careless."

With a cry of relief on her lips Jan had flown down the stairs, instinctively running to join Weaver. They were on opposite sides, but he was her friend. More than a friend, she realized now upon seeing him alive, when she had been so afraid he had been murdered.

"I'm so glad they didn't find you!" she cried huskily. "Those two gunmen . . ."

"They did find me," said Weaver, throwing her a quick, ardent glance. "Step around in front of Diamond H, Jan, and lift his big gun outa the shoulder holster under his left arm. Be careful. . . . No-o, yore men wasn't so careless, Malden. I borrowed a hat and jumper from Paley Jones and I'm ridin' his hoss. Yore sentry out yonder along the road thought I was Paley."

Relieving Malden of his weapon, Jan saw the big man's eyes roll around in their deep sockets. He was not enjoying this situation.

"Yore sentry, old grey-beard Jake, was considerable surprised like. So was Mace Malden, Snip and Bronc when I stepped into the bunkhouse. None of them four'll be comin' to interfere for quite some time, Diamond H. . . . Jan, is anybody upstairs? The tenderfoot, for instance, and Frank Newhouse? I'm right anxious to take Newhouse with us as well as old Diamond H."

"No one upstairs," Jan announced. "Oh! What about Big Stella? I wonder if she'll—?"

"She forgot to lock her door," Weaver cut in. "So I locked it on the outside." Then anxiously: "Where's Newhouse?"

"I can't tell you," said Jan.

"Weaver, yore actions are plumb strange for a loyal Longhorn rancher—one of us," Malden bega- "Treachery is somethin' I—"

"Button yore teeth, Diamond H! . . . Jan, here's a pigging string. Tie the old he-wolf's wrists. I wish we could git Van Ormond away before he gits hurt on this boogery spread. But no time to look for him or Newhouse. . . . Git a wrap, li'l girl. We're ridin' with Diamond H to meet Thad Kelly and I reckon we'll stop this war. I reckon we'll more'n stop it. I reckon we'll—"

Jan had tied Malden's wrists when glancing up, she once again saw the dilated with horror, for two men with guns had slipped through that door! She tried to shout a warning to the Tincup cowboy, but the words caught in her suddenly tight throat.

"Drop that gun!" snarled Mace Malden behind Bun Weaver.

Two more men appeared, crowding into the room from the dining room. Bronoc and Snip. The tall man with the light hair and pale eyes beside Mace Malden she had seen with Mace in the mountains. Paley Jones!

WEAVER hesitated a second before dropping his gun and elevating his arms. Paley Jones picked up the cowboy's Colt.

"Jest in time, eh, Diamond H?" he said. "Yuh kin always bank on old Paley Jones."

He untied knots, releasing Malden's wrists. "I shore got a-plenty to tell

you, boss. . . . Hey, Bronc, keep an eye on that girl . . . Snip, you hog-tie Weaver . . . Hey, Mace, hold onto yoreself! Don't bash Weaver's skull in. The pleasure of killin' him is mine."

"Yeah, jest in time, Paley," agreed Malden, glancing at the baffled, furious Tincup cowboy. "That doublecrosser was going to take me to Thad Kelly's camp. Where is Kelly?"

Paley Jones grinned. "Right about now, or mebbe sooner, Thad and his bandits is bein' wiped out right nice by the ranchers."

As if in a bad dream Jan heard that. Weaver had come so near rescuing her from Malden, only to fail because of this slippery, snakish Paley Jones, and now—

"What's that?" ejaculated Diamond H. "That's not the way this fight was to be managed."

"Shore it ain't," agreed Paley. "But, after I'd met up with McNulty, Leckenby and the bunch—the how-come of that I'll tell yuh later—I seen a chance to project them two forces into a scrap to the death, and made the most of it. The fight's takin' place up on the ridge above the Tincup and north of Crazy Creek. The Kelly bandits'll ride into an ambush. . . . Hey, lookit the girl! Somethin' about this don't please her! But 'course Kelly's men'll kill and cripple a lot of ranchers and cowboys and—"

"And so the time has come for us to strike," interjected Mace Malden.

He stood a few feet behind Weaver with a cocked six-shooter in his right hand, and in his eyes seemed a hope that the Tincup would offer him some slightest excuse to empty his gun into Weaver's body.

"No need of our beatin' 'round the bush in front of Weaver," Mace growled. "He'll never git to tell what he learns."

Paley Jones glanced slant-eyed at Bun Weaver.

"Some earlier tonight I thought that same thing," he drawled, "and bragged of a few things I shouldn'ta mentioned. Then damned if Weaver didn't give me the slip and kill Ab Rutgears to boot."

"Weaver killed Ab Rutgears?" asked Malden incredulously.

"Uh-huh. Ab's the second Diamond H man he's dropped."

"It will be the last," clipped Malden. "Who's that comin'? Our men?" Horses were entering the yard.

"Shore," said Paley Jones. "When I fogged in and found old Jake hogtied in the sage I sent him to git the gang together. If yuh'll send 'em to the Tincup ranch, I'll tell 'em where to go from there. Or Mace'll go with the boys. He knows the trail."

"Yuh bet I'll go," said Mace. "Quick as I finish my business with Bun Weaver."

"I'm to finish that!" Paley retorted.

"NO arguin," snapped Diamond H. "And not so fast with yore plans, you two. Lay all yore cards face up, Paley. I want to know exactly what Sam McNulty and the rest of the ranchers and cowpunchers was doin' a-top the range; also their exact whereabouts. And exactly whereabouts was Thad Kelly with his bandits? What was they doin'? What did it look as if they intended doin' tonight?"

"I don't see no need of it, but I kin give yuh the lay," said Jones, his boastfulness a little deflated by Malden. "McNulty led his bunch into the mountains, by way of Cougar Canyon, tryin' to find Kelly. Thad Kelly run away from 'em, leavin' a false trail made by loose hosses. They got wise to it and along about nine or ten o'clock tonight headed for the ridge trail north of Crazy Creek's valley. Kelly was heading for this same trail. When I saw his band, he was considerable ahead of the ranchers. It looked like Thad was intendin' to drop down onto the Longhorn to raid some ranch."

"Yes," Malden put in impatiently. "McNulty and the other ranchers were followin' about the same route across the mountains as Kelly, wasn't they?"

"Uh-huh."

"And somehow or other the ranchers got ahead of Kelly. You met them on the ridge above the Tincup, jest after you and Ab Rutgears tangled with Bun Weaver? Yuh haven't told us the straight of that yet, but never mind."

"Yeah," Jones said, nodding. McNulty got ahead of Kelly on that trail. Otherwise I—" He threw a malevolent look at Bun Weaver. "Yore hell-born scheme back-fired, hombre. That note yuh left, together with a few well chosen remarks from me, shore convinced them salty old ranchers yuh was doublecrossin' 'em!"

Jan saw the twitch of little muscles in Weaver's lean brown cheeks. She hoped Diamond H would ask for details of the "hell-born scheme" mentioned by Paley, but Malden was not to be side-tracked.

"Then McNulty's men musta passed Kelly in the dark at close quarters," he said thoughtfully. "That means Thad Kelly or some of his men musta been close by when you, with McNulty and the rest was planning this ambush, Paley . . . That trap won't be sprung!"

"What?" Paley exclaimed.

"How yuh figger that out, Dad?" demanded Mace.

Motionless on the stairs, Jan waited for Malden's answer. His statement revived hope within her when all had seemed lost.

"Do you two yearlin's—well, you ain't no yearlin', Paley, but Mace is—think yuh're dealing with a half-wit?" Malden said, glowering. "Thad Kelly coulda planned and handled this war o' his better'n he has, but he's nobody's fool, and now yuh've explained the situation up there a-top the range, Paley, I'm shore as guns that Kelly got wind of the ambush you and McNulty planned."

Paley's crooked mouth fell open. "How could he? Yuh mean somebody from Kelly's force coulda been listenin' in?"

"Even if nobody did, they'da smelled a rat," Malden pointed out. Then abruptly: "We're not goin' to leave the Diamond H wide open to an attack tonight. Step outside, Paley, and tell Nevada Ed and the boys to take to the brush again. Tell 'em to wait for further orders, but be ready to strike when the sign is right . . . Tell Flash to stay here, too. I'll be needin' him."

AS Paley Jones left the room, Bronc and Snip, at a sign from Malden, ranged themselves on either side of Bun Weaver.

"Search him, Mace," commanded Diamond H. "Pull off his boots even . . . Bun, no use asking yuh, I reckon, but did this girl here hand yuh any papers of any kind last night?"

"Papers?" said Weaver. "Shorely an old fox like you never kept anything around that could mebbe be used as evidence against yuh?"

"None of yore impidence, traitor! . . . Find anything, Mace?"

"Nothin' of any importance, Dad."

"Traitor, huh!" flared Bun. "If only Sam McNulty, Jerome Leckenby, Dell Floyd and the rest knew what I know about yuh!"

Malden shrugged significantly. "Mebbe yuh suspect certain things. But kin you prove 'em? Anyway, yuh'll never have the chance."

The words, the tone of voice, made Jan's heart again stop beating. She could not lose Bun Weaver now! But Malden, terrible and all-powerful, two-faced scoundrel that he was, held the whip-hand.

She had been dimly aware of the sound of voices out in the yard and of horses going away from in front of the house, and now Paley Jones had come back to the living room. With him was a youth whom Jan had not seen before.

However his resemblance to Diamond H and to Mace was so striking she immediately knew him to be Flash Malden.

Diamond H beckoned to him and Mace. The three moved aside and held a whispered consultation.

"Keep up yore courage, Jan," Weaver called softly. "The darkest hour's jest before the dawn, they say."

Jan had this thought to carry with her to her own prison room after Diamond H had said, "All right, boys. Lock Weaver in the old Bill Kelly cabin." After Bun Weaver had left with his five-man escort, Malden turned to her.

"Go to yore room, Miss Kelly," he ordered brusquely, "and I'll lock the door. I'm thinkin' my latest strategy oughta bring results. Yeah, before sunup I reckon I'll know all I need to know about Ormond Van Ormond; his tie-up with Bun Weaver and you, if any; whether or not he's the thief that looted my safe, and if so, what he done with the letters he took."

"Van Ormond?" cried Jan, bewildered. "You said he was dead."

"Did I? Well, he ain't—yet. If that's any comfort to yuh."

CHAPTER XIX

Prisoners

INSTANTLY the flame of hope in Bun Weaver's heart which had lately died, began once again to glow dimly. He was not to be dispatched at once! However, it would have been suicide to attempt to fight on his march to the Bill Kelly cabin, the door of which he immediately noticed had been rebuilt and equipped with a hasp and padlock.

Snip cautiously opened the door.

"Don't try nothin', greenhorn," he said to somebody in the dark cabin. And when there was no answer: "Hey, you in there, mebbe this news'll interest yuh. Harris Clark, the postmaster at Nugget has committed suicide."

Still there was no reply. Paley Jones prodded Bun savagely in the back.

"In with yuh. Reckon yuh kin guess I didn't have much trouble convincin' them salty old Longhorn ranchers yuh was doublecrossin' 'em! If they'd got hold o' you, Weaver, they'd deprived me of the pleasure of gunnin' yuh myself, which same I'll do at sunrise."

Weaver answered no word. He was inside the darkened cabin with its only window boarded over. The door closed behind him with a click. He heard the grate of the padlock in the hasp, then the sound of steps going away. A voice spoke out of the blackness:

"Bun Weaver, eh? I'm Ormond Van Ormond."

"The tenderfoot of the stage!" exclaimed Weaver. "Now we're sharin' the same quarters at the Diamond H. Why are you so honored?" As his eyes became accustomed to the intense darkness he made out the other man's figure and he reached out to clasp Van Ormond's hand. " 'Twas a fine thing yuh done for Jan Kelly last night. Not yore fault it done no good."

"So they got her again, eh?" Van Ormond said. "Hell! I'm away behind on up-to-the-minute news; also away behind on meals. I'd give a hundred dollars for one cup of water. The canny old he-wolf is trying the starvation torture on me."

"So-o?" whistled Weaver, then he grinned in spite of the seriousness of his situation. "We-el, at least you filled yore bread basket last evening. Me, I'm findin' a meal every twenty-hour hours is a luxury. Where do I set down? I'm bunged up from head to heel. All my muscles and bones start

growlin' and yelpin' whenever I have time to think about 'em."

"Sit on the ground," invited Van Ormond. "It's hard as the hubs of hell, so without a pick, jack-knife or anything there's no earthly chance of digging a hole under this cabin's wall. No chairs, no boxes. They moved out all the old junk before moving me in. Took my pipe and tobacco, too, damn the luck!"

"Relieved me of my makin's, too," muttered Weaver, seating himself gingerly. "I take it we ain't got a Chinaman's chance of gittin' outa here?"

"I've investigated the possibilities. Thoroughly. A rat might climb up the fireplace, but we can't. . . . Why am I here? Well, it seems—"

WEAVER caught a slight sound from outside the closed door. He clapped one hand over Van Ormond's lips.

"A pair of wide-open ears are beyond that door!" he whispered. "Humphmn! Now I savvy why I wasn't shot or hanged *muy pronto*. Malden allowed we'd talk and he'd learn all about you, I reckon."

Van Ormond bent forward to bring his lips close to the cowboy's left ear.

"I get it. I learned last night you were marked for death by this Diamond H mob. Now I'm taking it for granted we're on the same side of the fence, Weaver. I was thrown in here about three this morning. Wasn't killed immediately—because I wouldn't talk. Malden is determined to find out where I fit into this deal and (this is what has him fighting his head, going 'round in circles) he suspects I lifted a packet of letters from his safe! They're dynamite. He must find out what's become of them and that's why I'm still alive. I don't care if he does learn other things concerning me, so now we'll go ahead and talk naturally."

He lifted his voice for the benefit of the unseen eavesdropper outside.

"Shucks, Bun, you needn't prowl this prison trying to get out. It can't be done. Come back here and sit down again."

Weaver grinned. This fellow might be a man of mystery, but he'd do to ride the river with. A greenhorn? If he was a greenhorn Bun Weaver was a Bostonian.

In a disgruntled voice he said: "Well, I jest had to prowl the play anyhow. Now why is it you're here, mister?"

"It seems I'm suspected of being a Thad Kelly spy," Van Ormond said. "Suspected of aiding Janet Kelly to get away from this ranch, suspected of spying on Malden's hidden army in the willows along the river. . . . Oho! So you know about that band of hand-picked killers, too! Do you know for what purpose they've been gathered?"

"Yuh're older than I am, Van Ormond," Weaver said soberly, "prob'bly been around lots more. But did yuh ever hear of such a hell-born plot?"

"Never, and in my work I run up against some corkers."

"In yore work?"

"Yes." Van Ormond again bent forward, lowering his voice. "What that listener most wants to hear he won't hear. But Malden may as well get his worst suspicions confirmed." In a natural tone he continued:

"I'm a United States deputy marshal and the reason for my visit here is a letter sent to our offce by the postmaster at Nugget."

Something clicked in Weaver's mind. "A letter from Harris Clark, the man this outfit says killed hisself?"

"Yes. . . . But suicide? Say, I can't prove it, but Frank Newhouse murdered Clark, making it look to be suicide, before Newhouse hode hell-bent from Nugget to the Diamond H to tell Malden where the original Bill Kelly promissory note was hidden. Newhouse would have come sooner if he got this information sooner. He must have inviegled Mrs. Kelly into telling him about the note."

WEAVER whistled. "So much for so much, Van Ormond. Yuh're good. Was this Newhouse the forger that wrote us ranchers threats in Jan Kelly's name?"

"He's the bird. Forgery and embezzlement are his long suits. He's wanted in Ohio on such a charge, now fourteen years old. He dropped out of sight and apparently vanished completely. But last night I met the crook face to face here on the Diamond H. Obviously he's been Malden's tool for approximately twelve years."

Van Ormond moved over to the fireplace, returning after a moment with two heavy pieces of rock each a bit larger than a hen's egg.

"Let me have your bandanna, Weaver," he whispered. "I'll manufacture a couple of blackjacks in the hope we'll get a chance to use them."

Weaver produced his big red handkerchief. "Tell me about Harris Clark," he suggested.

"His letter was clear. The old postmaster at Nugget was approached by Frank Newhouse and fell for the bait offered, agreeing to shut his eyes to the the fact that Newhouse was mailing letters in Bill Kelly's handwriting to the ranchers of the Longhorn. Agreeing also to hold all mail for the Kelly family until Newhouse first had a look at it."

"Then any letters we wrote was never seen by any of the Kellys?" Weaver put in.

"Exactly. Newhouse got them. And during all the years he worked for the Kellys Newhouse kept up a correspondence with Diamond H Malden. The trouble was that after these last letters that were supposed to have been written by Janet Kelly that old Harris Clark's conscience got the best of him. He wrote us all about the forged letters that had been sent from his post office, and about the Kelly mail that had been withheld. With his letter he enclosed a description of Newhouse and said he was positive that the forger, Newhouse, would be visiting the Diamond H ranch about this time.

"I was put on the job, and it so happened I rode the same stage from Cragmont to Last Stand with you and Miss Kelly and her brother."

"And thrust yore head into a hornets' nest," commented Weaver.

"Yes. I didn't go first to Nugget because I didn't want to alarm our quarry. Any outsider nosing around that post office would have caused him to blow, and blow fast. I didn't imagine Clark's life would be in danger. He'd said he realized he had been a party to something crooked and was ready to surrender to the authorities. But Frank Newhouse must have smelled a rat."

"Although I've never met the gentleman I'd say he's a right slippery snake," observed the Tincup cowboy. "Yuh s'pose he suspected you?"

"DON'T see why he should have," Van Ormond said, twisting and knotting his handkerchief around one of the small rocks. "Malden's the suspicous old war-horse, and when it comes to crooked work Frank Newhouse is a mere piker compared to the fine, upstanding, benovelent friend of all the Longhorn ranchers, Diamond H Malden. He's the boss, the brains and the power of this despicable organization. His principal assistants are his two sons—quite ambitious they are, too—his foreman, Nevada Ed, Frank Newhouse, and a fellow who was in Texas but is probably here by this time to play his part.

"This fellow has the cunning of the devil and the conscience of a weasel. He came to the Longhorn with Malden and was in the first war. Malden sent him to Texas to ride herd on Thad Kelly, as you cowpunchers say."

"I've met the hombre," Weaver interjected acidily. "Once he was Sid Atwell; now he's Paley Jones. Yes, he's here with bells on. But how kin yuh

know anything about that skunk, Van Ormond?"

"The packet of letters I removed from Malden's safe; letters from Newhouse to the boss, Malden; letters from Paley Jones. They tell a clear story of the framing of Thad Kelly in Texas, of one of the most amazing and bald swindles ever to be pulled off in any man's country, put over right here on the Longhorn. And finally of the most diabolical plot I've ever uncovered."

"Wow!" exclaimed the cowboy. "No wonder Malden has to git 'em back. . . . Van Ormond, how does it come any man as clever and careful as this wary old wolf didn't destroy that package of dynamite?"

His eyes now fully accustomed to the darkness, Weaver could see a grim smile flit across Van Ormond's plain, round face, and the man of mystery said:

"I guess every crook makes some mistake. This mistake on Malden's part was inspired by greedy ambition for his two wolf cubs. Written in Malden's hand on an envelope on top of the small collection of precious letters were these instructions: 'Strictly private. For my sons Mace and Flash, and to be opened by them only after I am dead.'

"Inside the envelope I found this message: 'Should the ranchers be victorious and should I meet death in this war, there may come a time when you, my sons, can use these letters to good advantage against Frank Newhouse and Paley Jones and Ridge Lockhard. A glance at the letters will show you the possibilities. But be sure to destroy all which might backfire to your disadvantage'."

CHAPTER XX

Eavesdroppers

PLAINLY thunderstruck, Bun Weaver gasped:

"Why, the old snake would even doublecross his own right hand men! . . . Hum! So far as this present war is concerned I've smelled out exactly what was in Malden's mind—a hell-born scheme straight from the devil."

"Yet simple," observed Van Ormond. "Thad Kelly and all the rest of you Longhorn ranchers tangle; Malden's crew takes no part in this fight. He's supposed to be without a crew. Therefore his army is hidden in the willows. Malden hopes Kelly will slaughter most of the ranchers and their cowboys. Whereupon, he steps in and massacres all the fighting men and boys on both Kelly's side and the ranchers' side.

"After this, Malden expects to get the holdings of the widows and orphans left on the Longhorn at his own price. He will be careful to keep the truth of the wholesale massacre from reaching any survivors."

"And to help matters along he hired a drygulcher to gun some of us," Weaver said bitterly. "I was on that killer's list, but upset his and Malden's plans and calculations by killin' him."

Van Ormond nodded. "More than that, you saved your friends from annihilation last night." He handed to the cowboy his own bandanna, twisted around a small, heavy stone and knotted so the stone would not fall out. "There you are, Bun," he whispered. "Swing it as you would a quirt, and if you sock a man in the right spot, it will do the business."

GLANCING toward the door he resumed in a clear voice:

"Have you wondered why Thad Kelly was not shot from ambush upon his return to Texas? . . . Well, Malden foresaw the day when Thad, alive and more vengeful and bitter than ever, might come in handy."

Astonishment was in the cowboy's voice as he blurted:

"Meanin' Malden thought if Thad Kelly ever got out of the pen, he would come back to the Longhorn to—"

"To take his revenge on the ranchers? Exactly. And after all these years the time came when Malden saw fit to make use of Thad Kelly. So, through Paley Jones, he brought pressure to bear on the governor of Texas to have Thad pardoned."

"How do yuh know?" Weaver demanded. He was remembering what Thad Kelly had said: "Some powerful influence was at work to git me out, but I don't know who was back of it."

"Just one of the things I learned from letters Paley Jones wrote to Malden," Van Ormond said off handedly. "And following Thad's release, Paley wrote Malden, 'Kelly is doing just what we thought he would do. He's gathering a crew to return to the Longhorn. I'll keep you posted'."

Again Van Ormond placed his lips close to the Tincup cowboy's ear. "I want you to know everything I've learned in the hope one of us may escape alive."

As though he had not heard that Weaver said musingly:

"So Malden, even twelve years ago, foresaw the day when Thad Kelly would be useful to him. H'm—And it was old Diamond H who told the rest of us, after we'd whipped the Kellys, that we'd oughto do the square thing by Bill Kelly and pay him for his cattle and hosses; with a note bearing compound interest, but not due for twelve years. Good gravy! It was in his mind right then that he'd collect from all the rest of us our part of that debt."

"Certainly," agreed Van Ormond. "And that brings us to the part played by the Ridge Lockhard I've mentioned. Bill Kelly, watched always by Frank Newhouse, had at the end of ten years still made no move to collect that note, and for all his foxiness Newhouse had been unable to obtain the original. Compound interest mounts up amazingly in ten years and Malden thought it high time to strike, particularly as clever Paley Jones had at last found exactly the man to impersonate Bill Kelly. This impersonator required little in the way of make-up to play the role. He was Ridge Lockhard."

"So Newhouse was roped in to draft a forged promissory note," suggested Bun. "Also to write forged letters, supposedly from Bill Kelly to us ranchers, to pave the way for the settlement of the debt. Then this Ridge Lockhard come from Texas to the Diamond H, where he put up with Malden. The rest of us ranchers believed he was old Bill Kelly, and paid him."

"That's how it was put over," Van Ormond said. "I haven't seen this Ridge Lockhard, but I expect he's here to do his bit for Malden again and get a cut of the profits."

"Hope he is," growled Weaver. "Still neither one of us has got a chance in a million of gittin' outa this hell-hole. Jan Kelly either, for that matter. She knows too much for Malden to risk lettin' her go. Plain hell! . . . Van Ormond, them letters shore seem to have a mine of information in 'em. Did yuh git anything about Jack Deane? He was one of the original ranchers; sold out to Malden and was mysteriously murdered and robbed."

AGAIN Van Ormond nodded. "A paragraph in one of Frank Newhouse's letters to his boss reads, 'I've heard about Jack Deane. Also that you paid him ten thousand in cash over and

above the amount of the obligation you assumed. Don't neglect your friends, Malden, or a whisper may reach Deane's neighbors that Nevada Ed got Deane and Diamond H Malden got his roll'. . . . The next letter from Newhouse intimated he was satisfied with the cut sent to him."

Weaver drew a deep breath. "To think we've trusted that Malden sidewinder! No wonder he wants them letters. If only I had 'em to show to Sam McNulty and the rest of 'em!"

Bending forward until his lips brushed the cowboy's ear Van Ormond said, "They're deep in a coffee drum in the kitchen. The original note is in the handle of my shaving brush. The time's come now for us to try our luck at getting a break. Weaver, I hope for the girl's sake, you get out with a whole hide. . . . Slide over and stand right beside the door. You'll know what to do if it's opened."

Then he lifted his voice. "Yes," he remarked, "they would be interested. So would Thad Kelly. The evidence we hold against Diamond H is dynamite, as you say. Bun, in the hope you may escape I'm going to tell you where to find that packet of letters. They're —." Van Ormond's voice dropped to a throaty whisper.

Weaver had silently flattened himself against the wall close to the door, and as Van Ormond ceased speaking aloud, he heard the rasp of the padlock as it was jerked from the staple outside. The door was violently flung open. But no one stepped across the threshold, and the taut-nerved Weaver made no move. He could see no one.

Ormond Van Ormond, however, saw both Mace and Flash Malden! Guns vised in their right hands the two stood well back from the opening, glaring into the dark room.

"Out with it, Van Ormond!" Mace snarled. "Me and Flash know all about you and Weaver; everything we had to know 'cept where them letters are cached. Come through. I'll count three before we begin shootin'!"

Weaver's thoughts raced. The ruse had worked. But the Malden boys were too wary to step inside this cabin; even to thrust their heads through that open door. If Weaver lunged out at them, searing lead was sure to burn him down.

"One!" snapped Mace Malden.

"Boys," Van Ormond said coolly, "that's no way to go at this. You've got to make a trade with me."

"No trade!" clipped Mace. "The stuff's hid somewhere on this ranch, for yuh ain't been off it. Talk fast . . . Two!"

"The cubs of the old he-wolf ain't bluffin'," thought the desperate Tincup cowboy. "No matter what I do they're shore to get us both, unless—"

Was that a new sound from without? A sound at the corner of the old cabin? *It was!*

CHAPTER XXI

Who Lighted the Powder?

KNOWING they were on a desperate mission, midnight had come and passed before Thad Kelly with his crew reached Cougar Canyon. Riding down along it, their horses shied around several dead cattle and one lifeless horse, grisly reminders of how Bun Weaver had taken a stolen herd away from these rustlers and had almost lost his own life by so doing. All hands were present, for Big Foot Ben, upon discovering that his ruse to lead the ranchers astray had failed, had abandoned the loose horses and had rejoined his comrades.

"You didn't happen to catch sight

o' that cattle buyer I was expectin'?" Thad Kelly had asked Big Foot.

"I shore did and talked to him," was the surprising reply.

The prospective stock buyer, Big Foot Ben said, had been using his field glasses from the top of a convenient mountain peak. He had seen the party of Longhorn ranchers, noted their strength, and concluded that he wanted no part of the cattle stolen from those fellows.

"You tell Thad our deal's off," he had said. "I'm driftin'."

This was disconcerting news to the Kelly crew. Some took it stoically, others swore.

"We'll make out yet," Thad growled. "Humph! That hombre's plenty yella!"

NOW, as the band dropped down the canyon, Billy, beside his uncle, who rode with his keen old eyes continually searching the darkness, broke a long silence:

"Uncle Thad, I don't git this straight a-tall. Bun Weaver ain't no double-crosser. Yet he shore figgered to turn Paley Jones over to you. I kin kinda see that, since Paley was out to kill Bun. I kin kinda see why them snorty ranchers figgered Bun was throwin' 'em down, too. But doggone it, he jest ain't that kind of hombre. Still, what the dickens did he mean sayin' he was goin' to grab onto old Diamond H Malden hisself and bring him to you? Uncle Thad, my rope's plumb tangled."

"Son, this Bun Weaver talked purty straight. Spite of what we'd done to him, burnin' his ranch, swipin' his herd —and he thought we'd killed his man, which we hadn't—he wanted to stop this fight. There's somethin' hellish a-goin' on behind the scenes. Somethin' we ain't hep to, but Bun Weaver is. I figger he's got a whiff of skunk scent and it's leadin' direct to Diamond H Malden."

"Heck," said Billy. "First time I looked at Malden somethin' told me he was an old skunk. Jest the same, he's the boss of the Longhorn, and the ranchers all—"

"Trust him," grunted Thad Kelly. "Yet the message Weaver left for me along with the double-damned Jones tarantula read, 'Only Malden, none of the rest of us knew of the dirt he did you in Texas.' Seems Malden don't always let his right hand know what his left is doin'. As I git it, spite o' how the thing looks to Sam McNulty and his bunch, Bun Weaver wasn't never doublecrossin' 'em. He was still hopin' to settle this mess by bringin' me and the big boss hisself face to face for a showdown."

"I'm scairt Bun *will* tie onto Diamond H, jest like he said," Billy remarked mournfully. "He'll take him out to the Tincup and run into the proddy rancher — and git his neck stretched. Ain't no way we kin be in time to stop it, worse luck."

"Yearlin'," Thad Kelly said, "I'd oughta git mad as blazes at you for cottonin' to that young dare-devil cowhand. Yet — yet damned if I don't kinda — kinda — Well, I admire his spunk and grit myownself. Don't you worry none 'bout Weaver runnin' foul of them snorty ranchers. His chances of takin' Malden off the Diamond H is jest 'bout as good as the chances a jack rabbit would have of hoppin' into a wolf den where there's six husky, half-growed pups and takin' the old she-wolf herself outa there. And that's the main reason I decided we'd visit the Diamond H tonight. Only wish we could git there sooner."

"Let's ride faster, Uncle Thad."

"Not with such rough goin'. Bung our hosses all up on rocks; mebbe break their legs; mebbe our own necks. We'll rattle our hocks when we hit open country. . . . Son, yuh ever hear from yore daddy the straight of how this damn war on the Longhorn busted loose twelve years ago?"

"Well, I s'pose so, Uncle Thad, though Dad'd never talk about it quiet-like. He'd begin to fume and—"

"There's a little somethin' about the way the match lit in the powder I never got ironed out in my mind satisfactory, son. We'd drifted up from Texas, your daddy, mother and you kids; me and the cowboys. Bill Kelly owned the whole outfit. I was jest along with him as *segundo* or trail boss.

"WE found the Longhorn River, liked the country fine, pitched camp, decided to stay. Had fourteen riders. Didn't need all of 'em no more, so paid off them as wanted to go back home. That left us seven men. We kinda rode herd on the cattle, watchin' 'em begin to put on the taller, and we built a cabin."

"It's still standing," exclaimed Billy.

Thad paid no heed. "Came this bunch of settlers, good stock, no riff-raff and not the kind of folks yuh'd call damn squatters. McNulty, Leckenby, Dell Floyd, Tom Weaver, Bun's dad, others, all square-shooters and the kind of fellers who'd make real cowmen, too."

"Whee! Why I thought yuh hated 'em 'till yuh couldn't say nothin' good 'bout 'em, Uncle Thad."

"Button that big mouth of yore'n till I git done a-talkin'. Hate and prejudice shore warp a man's thinkin'. I'm tryin' now to see them fellers as I seen 'em fust-off twelve years ago, several of 'em with families. I rec'lect Malden was a widower, yet with him, takin' care of his two kids, was a strappin' big cowlike woman he called his housekeeper. I rec'lect, too, most of the men that had no families was workin' for Malden. He had a small herd of cattle and hosses. Some of the others owned a few head and they'd all been throwed into one bunch, these extra men either drivin' the cattle or drivin' teams.

"Well, Billy, me and yore dad wasn't pleased a-tall to see that flock o' land seekers. We told 'em blunt we was there first and they could drift elsewhere. They had other ideas 'bout that; was jest as stubborn as we was. Tempers b'iled over and there was plenty of fightin' talk. Smoke, but no fire. That went on for a spell, with the newcomers startin' to pick out good home sites all 'long the different creeks.

"Me and yore dad, son, seen how plumb ambitious they was; how eager and hopeful their woman folks was and — well, we pulled in our horns. After all there was plenty room for all of us, plenty of grass, more water'n we could ever use. So we dropped round to the settlers' main camp—they were stickin' close together 'count of bein' scairt of us—told McNulty and Leckenby and Malden the fight was off so far as we was concerned. And b'golly we all shook hands and buried the hatchet.

"That evenin' McNulty's father, a tolerable old man, was shot dead while he was huntin' sage hens 'bout a mile from camp."

THAD KELLY broke off, silent for several minutes while he and his riders plodded on down Cougar Canyon in the darkness the old-timer brushed a hand across his eyes as if to brush away memories of something stark.

"That was the match to the powder barrel," he said his words hard and bitter. "They accused us of trickin' 'em, gittin' 'em off-guard by peace talk and then killin' an old man they all liked. Every cowboy we had denied shootin' Dad McNulty, but that didn't help none a-tall. Besides, them settlers was too ringy to listen to our side. Somebody fired a shot and hell busted loose.

"Outnumbered 'bout three to one though we was, we give 'em a scrap for their money, but we was licked to a frazzle. Howsoever, all this I'm tellin'

you, son, leads up to the one great big, unanswered question, which same has been ridin' with me all these years: Who started that fight to the death and why?

"Dad McNulty wasn't killed by one of our men, nor by me, nor by Bill Kelly. He was shot by some snake on the other side of the argument! 'Twas done to rile them settlers and set 'em on us Kellys.

"Now, after all these years I've got a hunch about that dirty business and it's ridin' me fierce. It's more'n a hunch, Billy. The rattlesnake as didn't sound no warnin' twelve years ago has struck again without rattlin'. The same underhanded, cunnin', hellish tactics has come to light again.

"Son, you heard Bun Weaver accuse me of hirin' the drygulcher he was lucky enough to kill? Who did hire that murderer? Well, I think Bun Weaver has got the same hunch about it I have. Billy, all the snake sign on the Longhorn leads to one man—Diamond H Malden."

Billy offered no comment. The boy was speechless, rather, terrified by the harsh bitterness of Thad Kelly's voice and the fire in his eyes. He liked this grim old uncle of his, but Thad Kelly's fierce hatreds were terrible to one so young as Billy.

As the riders emerged from the canyon, Thad spoke briefly to his followers.

"We're headin' as the crow flies for the Diamond H and whippin' our hoses down the flank. Want to make that timbered hill north-west of the buildings unseen if we kin do 'er. But it's mighty likely there'll be a sentry or two posted on that hill, so, Hawk and Tex, you two hit out ahead and kinda take care of that situation."

"Let me go, too," begged Billy.

The old warrior shook his head. "Yuh're stayin' with me, son."

So Billy stayed, tingling with excitement, wondering what this night would yet bring forth. Wondering how Jan had made out. Wondering about Bun Weaver. Wondering how long the ranchers and their cowboys would wait on the ridge north of Crazy Creek for Thad Kelly to ride into their ambush. Wondering what those ranchers would yet do tonight.

HORSES at a steady lope, the Kelly men followed along the base of the mountains until they reached a point about a quarter of a mile north of the Diamond H buildings. Here they drew rein, with no sound except the panting of the winded horses, the subdued squeaking of saddle leather and a few low, whispered words. Then out of the night materialized two riders, each leading with his rope a man on foot.

The riders were Hawk and Tex Jarvis. The captives, with hands lashed together behind their backs, with crude gags in their mouths, were Jake, the gray-bearded choreman and — young Billy's eyes thinned as rage and hate rose within him—Frank Newhouse!

"One of 'em was in this open valley where a crick runs past the buildin's," reported Hawk. "The other was 'top the hill in the quakies."

"How'd you boys ever get 'em without even a shot?" Billy blurted.

Tex chuckled softly. "I got me a plumb good cutter," he remarked, exhibiting a pearl-handled revolver, "and an extra carbine. Yuh like to have it, son?"

Billy reached eagerly for the short-barreled saddle gun. "When I git broke in I'll make a hand," he declared.

"The little ridge is clear now?" Thad asked.

"It shore 'nuff is. We prowled the brush."

"Then lead out . . . Couple of you boys give these prisoners a lift so we kin move faster. No matter what we ask 'em they're shore to lie, so I'll ask 'em nothin'."

Once again the riders of the night were moving, slowly, stealthily. Billy rather expected the dark Diamond H ranch buildings to erupt flashes of gunfire at any moment. But nothing had happened when the Kelly crew drew up a-top the hill in a heavy growth of quaking aspens.

"What now, Thad?" Tex asked under his breath. "Do we sneak in and set the place on fire?"

Apprehensively Billy clutched his uncle's arm. "But Jan's mebbe there! Mebbe Mace got her. That tenderfoot, Van Ormond, too, and mebbe Bun."

"I'd thought of all that," Thad growled. "Likewise every buildin' is mebbe full of gun hands. Though we've heard Malden had no help to speak of, somehow I can't swaller that. We'll scout before we—"

"Let me be one of the scouts, Uncle Thad," the boy urged eagerly. "Please! I done all right back yonder in the mountains."

"The kid shore done all hunky," said Hawk. "I take it, I'm—"

"Yeah, yuh're elected, Hawk," Thad broke in. "And yuh, son, go ahead. Leave that carbine o' yore'n behind. Here's a pistol for yuh. But don't yuh use it 'cept to save yore hide. Do what Hawk says and be careful."

Eyes glowing, Billy squeezed Thad Kelly's gnarled and knotted hand. A moment later he was again following Hawk. Down the slope through the leafless aspens they walked, the rustling of their feet on fallen leaves sounding in Billy's ears like the noise of a stampede.

PAUSED at the edge of the timber, they looked out and across an open area to the dark, massive buildings of the Diamond H. Far away on the Silver Tip Range the faint gray of dawn was beginning to appear and out of the east, so distant the sound was all but inaudible, there came the dim murmur of hoof beats.

Billy called the rangy, lantern-jawed Hawk's attention to it. "Mebbe it's the ranchers comin'. Mebbe they got tired waitin' for us to spring their trap and decided we wasn't goin' to do it."

"Whoever 'tis they're a long ways off yet," murmured Hawk. "I'll circle a li'l bit and prowl the bunkhouse, corrals, barn. You take the little old shanty first, then go on to the big house. Stop, look and listen, son." And Hawk melted away into the darkness.

His heart thumping, Billy dropped to hands and knees and wormed his way along the open ground, half expecting the flash of a gun to lance the darkness. Or a harsh challenge. But nothing happened. He reached the rear of the Bill Kelly cabin, started around it, and stopped as if he had met a rock wall.

From within that cabin came the muffled sound of voices. Billy strained his ears, unable to distinguish those voices or to make out what was being said. Abruptly then he heard the door jerked open and a voice that he knew.

"Out with it, Van Ormond," Mace Malden's voice snarled. "Me and Flash knew all about you and Weaver."

"Weaver!"

Was Bun Weaver in that old shack with Van Ormond? Pulses hammering, Billy stole to the corner, crouched and thrust his head around that corner. Mace Malden and another man stood a few feet back from the open door. Starlight glinted on guns in their hands, and Mace was demanding that Van Ormond, "Talk fast."

"Two!" the man rapped out.

As Billy raised himself erect loose gravel under his boots made a harsh, grating noise. He had a pistol, but if he showed himself he'd surely stop a bullet. Nevertheless he again thrust his head around the corner.

"Lift 'em," he exploded and jerked back his head.

A bullet ripping across the end of a log, hummed spitefully onward. But even as the roar of a six-shooter

crashed on Billy's ears, other things were happening.

CHAPTER XXII

To the Death

LOW to the ground like a charging wolf, Bun Weaver went out through the door, head-first, at the shot. His arms closed around two pairs of legs and the forward impetus of his body carried both Mace and Flash Malden to earth with him.

In the next split second Weaver was up on his feet; so was Mace, so, too, was Flash. As Weaver lunged at Mace, he saw Flash swinging his Colt around for pointblank shot at him.

But flying through the door like a projectile, Ormond Van Ormond crashed into Flash Malden, flattening him to earth again. Twice Van Ormond swung his improvised bandanna black-jack to Flash's head.

Bun Weaver had dropped his own black-jack. His left hand vised Mace's gun wrist, forcing the man's hand and arm down; his right fist smashed to stomach, to chest, to chin. Mace banged up against the cabin wall and slid down in a huddled heap, head rolling groggily.

Suddenly Weaver became aware of the presence of young Billy Kelly. Hopping up and down in his excitement the boy was crying:

"I was goin' to help yuh! But yuh never give me no chance!"

Billy," panted the cowboy, *"'twas you give us a chance!"*

Van Ormond was calmly, methodically hog-tying Flash Malden with pigging strings found in the fellow's pockets.

"Billy, where's Thad?" Weaver asked quickly. "What's he intend to do?"

BILLY did not answer for a moment. He was looking for Hawk, wondering why the man did not appear to learn the cause for the shots and the excitement. He could not guess that the efficient Hawk was at this very moment only a few yards distant, his body flat against the dark earth as he watched and listened.

No one had as yet appeared to see what the shots had signified. But now a second story window at the big house shot upward. Across the intervening distance came the gruff voice of Diamond H Malden:

"What are yuh doin', Mace?"

Weaver thought fast. Here in the shadow of the cabin Diamond H could not see what was going on. Mace Malden wasn't out cold. He could talk. He *must* talk. Swiftly the Tincup cowboy snatched Mace's fallen gun, vised the man's shoulder, prodded him in the ribs with the gun barrel.

"Say to yore dad," he commanded, "'It's all right Dad. We found out where the stuff is and we jest been plunkin' lead into Weaver and Van Ormond.'"

Mace hesitated a moment, his eyes rolling, then word for word he loudly repeated the message.

"I'll be right out!" Diamond H slammed down his window.

"I'll meet him at the door," clipped Van Ormond. Appropriating Flash Malden's gun, he sprinted toward the house.

"Billy, quick, help me," ordered Bun. "I got to tie these jiggers, gag 'em, lock 'em in this shack. . . . Where's Thad?" He was working rapidly as he spoke. "I'm damn glad he didn't fire this ranch house. Yore sister's here."

"I was scairt o' that." Billy sprang to help the Tincup cowboy. "Uncle Thad's up on the hill in the quakies. I

dunno what he'll do next. Yet he kinda thinks yuh're all right. Say, our boys grabbed onto the old choreman and Frank Newhouse."

Weaver dragged Mace into the cabin. Observing then that Flash Malden was unconscious, he did not stop to gag the fellow before boosting him inside. Hastily he closed the door and padlocked it.

"Billy, yore uncle's got to trust me. *Got to!* You go tell Thad Kelly his fight ain't with the ranchers of the Longhorn. It's with Malden! . . . How the blazes kin I convince Thad of that? . . . Tell him Malden has a crew of gunhands, killers, hid in the willows."

CRACK! A rifle spoke from an upstairs window of the main house. A bullet whistled an inch above Billy's head to bury itself in the cabin wall. Instantly Weaver grabbed the boy and hustled him around behind the cabin. The rifle was barking steadily. All out of breath, Ormond Van Ormond joined the Tincup cowboy and Billy. . . .

"Damn!" exploded Van Ormond "That's Malden shooting. He sighted me, raced upstairs before I could stop him. But I took time to grab the packet of letters and beat it."

"So the old wolf's onto us!" growled Weaver. "Say, them letters, Ormond! You mind passing 'em on to Thad Kelly? They'll convince him Malden's the snake he wants; not the rest of us ranchers."

"Here, son, take them." Ormond held out the packet. "But take care of them. They're evidence to send over the road the crookedest bunch of sidewinders ever to operate in cow country. . . . I just thought of something. Billy, tell Thad to lie low until he sees Malden's hidden army pour out of the willows and then—"

"Us Kelly men are to tear into 'em, huh!" said Billy excitedly. "I'll shore tell Uncle Thad. What about Jan?"

"I'll take care of her!" Weaver said, his jaw tight. "I'll grab Malden before his bunch gits here. Funny they ain't already got here."

He had started around the northwest corner of the building when something Billy Kelly said stopped him short.

"Bun, Mr. Van Ormond, what my uncle wants to know most of all is who fired the powder twelve years ago? Who killed old Dad McNulty?"

Bun Weaver's mind flashed back twelve years to the infuriated ranchers who, Weaver's own father included, had believed that Bill or Thad Kelly or one of the Kelly cowboys had shot Dad McNulty. Never until this moment had young Weaver questioned that verdict. But now, after all these years when, with Van Ormond's help, he had unmasked Diamond H Malden, a new thought on that old murder buzzed in his mind.

Ormond Van Ormond was answering the boy's question.

"Dad McNulty?" He frowned for a moment, then his face lighted. "Ah! I get the connection. Billy, tell Thad Kelly to look at the first letter from Paley Jones to Malden, on top of the pile. One paragraph of it reads: 'I can use that extra five hundred you promised me for polishing off old Dad McNulty. Send it along quick as you can spare it.' . . . Great Scott! Are there no depths of infamy to which this man Malden has not sunk?"

"Infamy?" Billy repeated. "Sounds fierce. What's it mean?"

"Never mind what it means, Billy," rapped the Tincup cowboy. "Thad Kelly will savvy what Paley Jones meant. The answer to a twelve-year-old riddle is clear at last, and I believe Thad'll play the hand out with me and Van Ormond against Malden. You slide up the hill, son, while it's still darkness enough to hide yuh and show Thad that letter before yuh tell him what we've asked yuh to."

Cold sweat stood on Bun Weaver's forehead and face. "Billy, whatever breaks now, there mustn't be no gun battle between you Kellys and the ranchers. Savvy?"

"I savvy plenty," said Billy and ran across the open area toward the hill. The gray light of dawn was strengthening.

From an upstairs window Malden could perhaps see the boy. Malden's rifle might crack at any moment. But Billy reached the aspens in safety and vanished

"COME," said Weaver to Van Ormond. "We've got to git to the house. Git old Diamond H. I'm scairt his men'll git her any second."

"Kinda think they believe the shooting was done by Mace and Flash putting out our lights," Van Ormond remarked. "Or possibly they're waiting for Malden's signal. You try for the back door, Bun. I'll make a stab at reaching the front. Both'll be locked. Good luck. . . . Do you hear what I hear? Hoofbeats sounding south-east of here?"

"Uh-huh. The ranchers or Malden's crew, which?"

Van Ormond shook his head. He sped around the old cabin and, zigzagging, dashed across the open area to gain the ranch house. Weaver, too, was running like the wind to reach the farther side of the dwelling. Malden's rifle barked twice and Weaver felt a messenger of death brush the back of his neck. Then, safe behind the house he heard the man's rifle roar again and again.

Snatching up a huge rock Weaver smashed it against the rear door. Relief surged through him as he heard a similar sound on the opposite side of the house. Van Ormond still on the job!

THE door splintered at the lock, gave way.

Leaping through, Weaver saw big Stella with a double-barreled shotgun leveled at him.

"Drop it!" he commanded.

"Git out or I'll give you both barrels!"

"Stella, you can't shoot a man." Weaver's eyes found the woman's and held them. Steadily, coolly, he walked straight toward the murderous weapon. It wavered in Big Stella's hands and suddenly the muzzle sagged downward.

"I oughter, but I can't," she whimpered.

Weaver took the gun, gently eased down its hammers. "You got a key to Jan's room?"

"Yuh won't need none," she said surlily. "He's took her out."

"Hell! Go to yore room, Stella. Keep outa this and you won't git hurt."

But Bun Weaver retained the shotgun as he ran up the back stairs.

CHAPTER XXIII

Mistaken Signal

VAN ORMOND, bleeding from a wounded left arm, had come up the front stairs. Both men saw immediately that the door of Jan's room stood open.

"Funny we got this far without havin' lead slung at us," said the cowboy tensely. "Where kin he be?"

"Bet he's up in the attic," said Van Ormond, "signalling his [illegible]. We're plain damn fools for going after him this way."

Weaver bounded up the attic stairs, Van Ormond right behind. They reached the top to find a closed door confronting them, and from behind that door came the voice of Malden; the snarling, trapped-wolf voice of Malden, all suavity and smoothness gone now.

"I've got Janet Kelly. I'll finish her if yuh try to come in!" And he cursed Weaver and Van Ormond.

"Checkmate," said Van Ormond, watching Weaver's set face. "He's mean enough to carry out that threat."

"You too yella to shoot this out with me, Malden?" the cowboy shouted. "I'll send Van Ormond away so there'll jest be the two of us."

"Git out!" roared Diamond H. "I've told yuh what I'll do if yuh so much as touch this door!"

"They're coming, Bun!" Jan Kelly cried shrilly. "From the willows, Malden's gun-hands. He's signaled them! Save yourselves while—"

Malden's voice rose in a wild yell.

"Men! Here to the house! This way!"

Neither Weaver nor Van Ormond could see what was happening out in the open in this first light of dawn. But Jan Kelly could.

Immediately following Malden's signal—that lighted red lantern waved from the south window—the Diamond H riders, ten strong, led by Nevada Ed and Paley Jones, had dashed out of the willows and galloped toward the ranch buildings. But when within a hundred yards of the stables and corrals, suddenly all except two of the riders had swerved to the east.

Malden was trying to make his bull voice heard above the *thud* of horses' hoofs when he and the girl saw what had caused his men to turn. Loping along the road, less than an eighth of a

mile distant, was a column of horsemen. Jan believed they must be her uncle with his hard-bitten crew, and her blood froze with dread. Nor was this feeling of stark horror lessened when Malden ejaculated:

"The ranchers and their cowpunchers!"

He stood three feet back from the window, his left hand clamped around the girl's wrist, his right vising a Colt .44. Except for boots and jacket Jan was fully dressed, for thus she had thrown herself down on the bed in her prison room, completely exhausted, and had slept until aroused by the first report of firearms—the shots Mace and Flash Malden had fired.

"And yore men are goin' to—to fight them!" she exclaimed.

This was obvious. The Diamond H crew, spread wide apart but abreast, their rifles ready, was charging straight toward the ranchers. Jan could see

puffs of dust drift from the frosty ground behind each racing horse. She saw the ranchers halt, apparently surprised and undecided for a moment, then they, too, spread out like a great fan. But instead of charging these men sprang from their saddles, and, rifles in hand, crouched close to the ground, preparing to meet that oncoming wave of horsemen.

Even as Jan watched, fascinated yet horrified, she was aware that the two Malden men who had dashed on to the buildings had reached the house and stopped. They were Paley Jones and another whom the girl had never before seen. But at sight of him Jan's eyes snapped open even wider. He was in his fifties, a stocky individual, and, even without a beard he looked so much like Jan's own father that for an instant she thought she must be seeing a ghost.

Then in a flash it came to her that this was the man whom Diamond H Malden had used to impersonate Bill Kelly and collect the debt!

"Paley! Lockhard!" Malden was shouting. "Call the men back. Why are they attackin' the ranchers?"

Paley Jones tipped back his head, staring up at the window.

"'Twas yore orders!" he yelled back. "You ain't forgot that the red signal, flag or lantern, meant for us to pour outa the brush and jump whoever was headin' into the ranch, and jump 'em a-shootin'!"

For a moment Malden choked, incoherent. Then:

"I didn't see the ranchers comin'. I needed help here. Now all hell's to pay. Too late to stop our men. But inside, you two, and *move!* Don't ask questions. Git Bun Weaver and Van Ormond. They're up here! They've got guns, but git 'em! Pronto!"

NEITHER Paley Jones nor Ridge Lockhard asked questions. Leaving their horses ground-hitched, they ran into the living room, vanishing from Jan's sight. But it was at this moment that something else attracted her attention as well as Malden's. Something which stirred her and thrilled her—even to the point of forgetting her shock and terror.

For with ringing thunder of hoofs, another band of riders appeared. They had come from the little wooded hill north-west of the buildings, and Jan did not see them until they were sweeping across the yard of the Diamond H ranch. A ragged, bewhiskered grim-eyed lot, they were, Thad Kelly and his renegades.

Like the Malden crew they were

spread out wide apart and abreast; like the Malden killers, every man had a rifle; like the Malden crew, they were charging. And beside old Thad Kelly rode Jan's kid brother. But Billy didn't glance up, nor did her iron-visaged uncle. They had eyes only for Malden's hired killers, thudding across the frosty earth yonder in the pink light of a new-born day.

Unable to tear her gaze away, the girl watched. Equally fascinated, but with far different emotions, Diamond H Malden also watched. His lips, ghostly white in his frozen face, were moving. She caught his muttered curses, his words, "And *I* gave my killers the signal!"

"The signal which meant for them to attack any riders approaching the Diamond H," said Jan significantly.

Malden glowered at her. "It's the end for them, for me, for Mace and Flash. Two men spoiled everything. Van Ormond and Weaver. Weaver got onto me."

Thunderous drum of hoofs. Dust ripping up out of the dry earth under its white frost coat. Then the sudden, savage snarl of rifles.

Jan's hands clenched, fingers gouged her palms. The Malden crew had opened fire on the ranchers! A single volley at long range which went unanswered, and then suddenly the Diamond H force was aware of the danger from behind them. The Kelly guns had opened up. The Kelly riders' warwhoop lifted above the roar of those guns. They had emptied two Diamond H saddles.

As one man, the Malden crew threw their charging mounts back on their haunches, whirled them about-face, trying desperately to make a stand against this new and totally unexpected menace. Kelly riders swept onward like a great wave. Flame leaped from rifle muzzles as they rode. Deafening crash of exploding firearms. Saddles empty on both sides now. Horses crashing to earth; wounded horses squealing with pain.

Abruptly the Kelly forces swerved sharply to the right, and a moment later came abreast of the Diamond H men. But south of them, so that the ranchers were no longer in the line of Kelly's fire, nor were Kelly's men in the line of bullets from the Longhorn ranchers. At last those ranchers were taking a hand in this fray. Had not Diamond H men fired on them? They had. And now the Diamond H was caught between two fires.

Jan closed her eyes and turned her head away. But only a minute later the deafening crash of guns had ceased, and Malden, standing beside the girl, his fingers and thumb biting into her wrist, gasped:

"A massacre! But not as I planned it! Not as I planned it! Kelly and

McNulty never tangled at all. Instead, Kelly's renegades and the ranchers doubled up against my men. Hell!"

CHAPTER XXIV

"They're Burying the Hatchet!"

UTTERING sharp oaths at the warning that Malden's men were coming, Bun Weaver and Van Ormond bolted down the stairs to the second floor, darted into the nearest room. From the window they saw the Diamond H men sweeping toward the ranchers.

"Nevada Ed's leading the charge!" ejaculated Weaver. "Bronc and Snip are with him. I was wonderin' where that pair of coyotes could be. About half the men ridin' with Nevada are new hands."

His attention focused upon Paley Jones and Ridge Lockhard drawing rein in front of the house. Upon hearing Malden's command to these two, Weaver and Van Ormond, with an understanding nod at each other, swiftly and silently descended to the first floor. One stepped behind the open living room door; the other flattened himself against the wall beside that door.

Paley and Lockhard, shoulder to shoulder, stepped across the threshold, Van Ormond swung his improvised blackjack to the skull of Paley Jones. The man pitched forward and down. Weaver was equally swift and sure. With the barrel of a six-shooter he dropped Lockhard.

"Paley out cold?" Weaver asked practically.

"He's batting his eyes," replied Van Ormond. "Shall I sock him again?"

"No. Slosh a little water in his face. We want him to talk. I'll—"

Picking Ridge Lockhard up bodily, Weaver heaved the man over his shoulder, lugged him up the stairs to the room where Jan had been imprisoned. There Weaver disarmed the man, stepped out, closed the door and fastened the padlock.

BACK down the stairs he went, in his ears the squeal of wounded horses and the voices of roaring guns. Out yonder, only four hundred yards or so distant, the battle was raging. He feared that even though Diamond H had attacked the ranchers, those same ranchers might attack Kelly once Malden's gun fighters were disposed of. However, he could not go to see about that, for something else was far more pressing.

Van Ormond, his head cocked to one side, birdlike, his Colt swinging in his hand, stood regarding the tall, pale-eyed, dish-faced Paley Jones whose head and neck and shirt were dripping from a dipperful of water.

"The snake can talk, Bun. What's your idea?"

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"Up the stairs with him, and keep ticklin' him in the ribs with that big smoke-stick. I'll tell yuh the idea." Weaver whispered the rest to his ally.

A moment later he himself was outside the door to the attic room in which Diamond H Malden had locked himself, with Jan Kelly as his hostage. As soon as the din of battle had abated so that his words could be heard Paley Jones, prompted by Van Ormond's prodding gun, shouted from the second floor:

"Malden! Malden! Me and Lockhard got them two hombres! Rattle yore hocks, man! Hosses outside the door. Yuh kin fan the breeze."

But Weaver's hopes sank, for Malden was still wary. The big boss of the Diamond H, now at the end of his rope, yelled back:

"Then if you and Lockhard have killed that pair, git my boys out that old cabin. Save yoreselves and them. Ride! This girl'll make me safe enough with my gun on her and her right in front of me neither the ranchers nor Kelly'll dare shoot. They'll know I kin press trigger afore I die. They'll have to let me ride out!"

"Hell! Malden's still holdin' aces," Bun Weaver gritted under his breath.

But the Tincup cowboy reckoned without the quick wit of Ormond Van Ormond. Again prompted by Van Ormond, Paley Jones yelled:

"We kilt 'em, Diamond H. But Lockhard's got a busted leg and I'm bleedin' to death. Yuh'll have to let Mace and Flash out yoreself."

The voice died away in a gasp, as if the man was near his end. Bun Weaver did not know until later how Van Ormond had induced Paley Jones to say what he had just said, not only because of the prodding gun but by telling him of the proposed doublecross. Malden had planned to have his sons put over on both Jones and Newhouse—as revealed by the letters.

Behind the closed door Diamond H snarled, "What the hell?" before he unlocked and threw open the door. To do this and to hold Jan at the same time he was obliged to holster his Colt and this gave Bun Weaver a chance.

For a single instant Jan Kelly saw these two enemies facing each other and never would she forget the insane glare that flashed from Malden's eyes. Weaver's right arm moved; the barrel of his gun crashed on Malden's wrist.

Free of his grip at last, the girl reeled back against the wall. And then Weaver was transformed into a human cyclone, sweeping the big man of the Longhorn backward across the room. They were at the window, Malden fighting to get his holstered gun as blows raining upon him forced him backward through that window.

A SPLINTERING of wood; a tinkle of shattered glass; then from far below a dull, sickening thud.

Bun Weaver, hatless, disheveled, winded, leaned out of the broken window. He gazed a moment at the still figure on the hard earth below, then looked away. Jan sped to his side, and her bright, hot eyes followed his gaze to a point beyond the ranch buildings where the Diamond H crew, too, had met their end. But out there now men of Thad Kelly's depleted force and men of the Longhorn were meeting without hostility.

Among all those horsemen and men on foot Jan picked out Billy, her kid brother, unharmed; bearded old Sam McNulty, leader of the ranchers; and Thad Kelly, stocky, rough-hewn old warrior, bare-headed and gory. Facing one another, he and McNulty were passing letters back and forth; each stopping to read a few lines.

"Whatever are they doing?" whispered the girl. "Do we dare to hope—"

Ormond Van Ormond, too, had witnessed the downward plunge of Dia-

mond H Malden.

"I think the old he-wolf's stunned but not yet dead," he remarked to Paley Jones. "He'll swing yet beside his two sons and Frank Newhouse and you, Paley. I think also that—" His eyes focused upon the meeting of shaggy old Thad Kelly and grizzled Sam McNulty.

"No!" he exclaimed. "I don't *think* this. I'm *certain* that the Kellyites and the Longhorn ranchers will unite in giving you five gentlemen your last dance on thin air! I'm an officer of the law, but—I'll be looking the other way! And after that, Paley—well, the future looks promising for the square-shooting ranchers of the Longhorn. For old Thad and such of his rough and ragged crew as are still alive. For my good friend, that first-class fighting man, Bun Weaver. For Bill Kelly's family, particularly Jan."

In the attic Bun Weaver looked straight into the blue eyes of Jan Kelly and the battle light in his own eyes died, to be replaced by another light; tender, solicitous, adoring. He drew her away from the broken window as his arms closed around her trembling figure. His voice was vibrant with sheer joy as he repeated her words:

"'Whatever are they doin'?' Why, Jan darlin', those letters, coupled with a few other things, have turned the trick at last. They're buryin' the hatchet."

"Is it—can that be true, Bun?"

"It is true, darlin'. As for you and for me, didn't I once tell yuh that love smashes—" He bent his head to meet her radiant upturned face, her expectant lips.

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Lee Arnold Fights Through Gunsmoke to Deliver a Cargo of Peace—in the Midst of Range War!

Arnold's Colt boomed as the Bar V man raised his rifle

LEAD LINGO

By TOM GUNN

Author of "Sheriff of Painted Post," "Blue Steele Rides Again," etc.

AGAIN came the heavy booming of guns and the dull thud of lead sinking into wood. The four men in the Circle J bunkhouse cursed as they heard the bullets hitting against the rough logs outside. All through the long night they had crouched there in the darkness battling against heavy odds.

"Don't sound like there's as many of them jaspers shootin' as there was an hour or so ago," said Lee Arnold as he knelt below a window sill, smoking six-gun in his hand. "We musta downed some of them."

"If we didn't then we shore been wastin' plumb plenty powder," came the heavy voice of old Seth Jefferies out of the darkness where he stood guard at another window in the rear of the bunkhouse. "Looks like they're aimin' to keep at it, though, till they wipe us

out." It was a plain statement of fact. There was no fear in the tone of the owner of the Circle J.

It was the finish of an old story in the cattle country, the termination of a bitter range war between the Circle J and Lem Vinson's Bar V outfit. A feud that had started when Vinson had fenced off the lower end of the valley, and thus prevented the Circle J stock getting to water.

At Jefferies' orders Circle J waddies had cut the wires of the new line fence, and three of them had died from flaming six-guns in the hands of the Bar V crowd. For weeks the hatred between the two spreads had grown deeper and more vindictive, and tonight it had terminated in Vinson and his men staging a raid on the Circle J with the avowed intention of cleaning out their enemies to the last man.

With the passing hours Jefferies had found his forces dwindling, until at last the ranch owner had been forced to barricade himself in the bunkhouse with his three remaining men.

"Good thing they's windows on all four sides of this buildin'," muttered Jefferies as he raised himself and peered out into the night. "Them sidewinders would be settin' fire to the place and smokin' us out if they could git close enough." He took careful aim and fired deliberately as he glimpsed a shadowy figure. There came a howl of pain and a man dropped to the ground. "Got him!" said Jefferies laconically.

From outside came a fresh blast of gunfire. Bullets buzzed like angry hornets. They came from all four sides as they struck the heavy logs and sped through the open windows of the bunkhouse.

"Shoo fly!" called out Lee Arnold mockingly as bullets whistled about his head. "You hombres all right, Parker?"

"Kinda nicked here and there," Jim Parker said a little ruefully. "But still able to sit up and take notice."

"How 'bout you, Martin?" Arnold was foreman of the Circle J and he was still taking care of his men, even though only two of them were left.

"Sleepy," said Martin. "Damn them Bar V varmints for breakin' up a man's night rest."

Old Seth Jefferies laughed. His four cowhands were sure men to ride the river with. They knew they might meet death at any moment but not one of them was afraid.

"Trouble with the Bar V is they don't know when to stay home nights," said Arnold. He raised his head and peered out. A gun roared and a bullet singed his hair. "Yuh see!" He ducked down again. "Just kinda restless like all the time."

"Reckon we fixed it so some of 'em is sleepin' right permanent," Jefferies said as he lifted his body for another shot. "I—"

From outside a gun boomed, and in the darkness of the bunkhouse there was a heavy thud as the old rancher's body dropped to the floor.

"They got the boss!" exclaimed Arnold. Crouched low, he fumbled his way through the black shadows to the side of the old man. He stumbled against the limp form, halted and knelt beside Jefferies, as he put out his hand to place it on the rancher's shirt. The flannel was warm and sticky and Arnold realized that his fingers were covered with blood.

"He dead?" called Parker anxiously.

"No—still breathin'," Arnold said. "But bleedin' a lot. I'm gonna strike a match and look at the wound."

"Yuh do and yuh'll stop a bullet just like the boss did," said Martin. "Them jaspers outside would love to have a light to shoot by."

"We've got to find some way of gittin' out of here, and gittin' the old man to the doctor," announced the foreman firmly.

"How?" demanded Parker. "There

ain't none of us sprouted wings or nothin'."

LEE ARNOLD frowned as he knelt there in the darkness. Parker was right. There was little chance of any of them being able to leave the bunkhouse without being killed by the gunslingers outside. Yet he had to find some way to get Jefferies to the doctor. All three of those Circle J men would fight for old man Jefferies to the last breath.

"I got an idea." Arnold stood up. It was quiet outside. Apparently the Bar V crowd had decided to hold their fire until they were sure of their targets. "Anybody got a rope?"

"Think one's hangin' on a rail over there by the bunks," Martin said. "What yuh aimin' to do, Lee?"

"Climb up through the chimney and out onto the roof," Arnold announced. "From there I might be able to reach that big tree in back of the bunkhouse. There's only one way to stop all this. That's to git Vinson—and I'm aimin' to do it."

The chimney of the big open fireplace in the rambling log-cabin bunkhouse had been built of rough stones and was large enough to permit a man to climb up inside. Particularly a young and slender one such as was Lee Arnold.

"Shore hope yuh make it," said Jim Parker. "I'll see if I can't do somethin' to stop the boss from bleedin' to death."

"I padded the wound as best I could with my bandanna," said Arnold. "But yuh better see what yuh kin do, Jim."

The young foreman finally managed to find the coiled rope hanging on a nail. Thrusting one arm inside the circle of lariat he hung the rope over his right shoulder so that his arms would be free to aid him in climbing.

Slowly he began to edge his way up the chimney. It was difficult work climbing in the black darkness, but finally he reached the top and was able to stick his head up over the side of the chimney. The night was cloudy and dark and there was little chance of his being seen by the Bar V men below.

To his delight he found that a stout limb of an oak was so close that he could almost touch it. Hoisting himself up he balanced on the chimney top, then leaped to the tree branch. He caught it, but his hands slipped and for a moment thought he was going to fall. But he managed to save himself in time, then swiftly worked his way by swinging hand over hand until he reached the trunk of the tree.

Lee Arnold breathed a sigh of relief when he found himself in a place where climbing down to the ground would be comparatively easy. He started the descent, then paused and remained motionless, feet resting on one limb of the tree and his hands clinging to another branch higher up. He had heard a noise. Someone was in the shadows beneath the tree.

Peering down he dimly made out the figure of a man standing there, watching the dark windows of the bunkhouse. And there was the glitter of a gun in his hand.

Arnold knew he was in a difficult spot then. He could not climb down any further without risking discovery by the man below and if he could not reach the ground soon all of his efforts would be wasted.

Guns started roaring from the front of the bunkhouse and to Arnold's relief the man below moved away in a crouch. The foreman hastily slid down the tree and was running as soon as he reached the ground, dashing to the shelter of some brush.

Gradually he circled around to the front of the bunkhouse, careful to keep beyond six-gun range and sure that the Bar V men would be stationed closer to the building.

He ducked down into the sage as he heard the clatter of horses' hoofs and

the rumbling of a heavy wagon.

"Wonder what's the idea of that?" he muttered. "Just what do they figger on doin' with a wagon?"

Swiftly it dawned on him that the approaching wagon might prove pretty useful in getting Jefferies to a doctor and he waited tensely as the two horses and the wagon rumbled closer. They were passing him as he leaped up, caught the driver and dragged him off the seat before the man could realize what was happening.

They landed on the ground with the driver sputtering and cursing and Arnold on top of him, holding him by the arms in a firm grip.

"What's the idea!" snarled his prisoner. "Who the hell are yuh anyway?"

Arnold's heart leaped as he recognized Lem Vinson's voice. This was far better luck than he had dared hope might come his way. From the first he had felt that the range war was something which might be stopped if the two stubborn old cattlemen who had been neighbors for so many years could be persuaded to talk things over. Vinson had started the trouble by building the line fence that had cut off the water from the Circle J—but Jefferies had started to fight back without making any effort to make the other ranch owner see that he was wrong.

"Who are yuh?" repeated Vinson, struggling to free himself from Arnold's clutch.

"Jefferies' foreman," snapped Arnold. "Yuh know me, Vinson."

"Arnold, eh!" snarled the old cattleman. "Mighta knowed it was one of the sneakin' Circle J outfit. Lemme go!"

"Not a chance!" the foreman gritted. "I'm figgerin' on usin' yuh as a hostage so's yore men will let us git Jefferies out of the bunkhouse and to a doctor. He's been bad shot."

The foreman had managed to get the owner of the Bar V twisted about so

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that his arms were behind him. Hastily Arnold tied the old man's wrists with the rope. When Vinson was securely bound Arnold dragged him to his feet for he had not as yet tied the old man's legs.

"Climb into the back of that wagon," he ordered. "We're driving right up to the bunkhouse door and if yore men try to down me it's gonna be just too bad for yuh."

VINSON was cursing fervently, but he did as he was told. With Arnold's aid he climbed awkwardly into the back of the wagon and dropped down so that his head was just above the side of the wagon bed. Arnold then tied the cattleman's feet so that he could not escape by leaping out. This done the foreman climbed up onto the driver's seat and picked up the whip and the reins in his left hand. He kept his right hand free, ready to reach for his gun.

"Yuh better holler when we git closer," he ordered over his shoulder. "For if yore men start firin' at me they're plumb likely to hit you, too."

Vinson did not answer. He sat there being jolted about uncomfortably as the heavy, springless wagon began to move.

"That yuh, Boss?" called a Bar V rider, stepping out of the shadows with a rifle in his hands.

"Git him!" shouted Vinson. "The driver is a Circle J man!"

Arnold's right hand streaked for his gun as the Bar V man raised his rifle. The foreman's heavy Colt boomed at the moment the man with the rifle fired.

A bullet grazed the Circle J foreman's right arm just below the shoulder as it sped by, but the man with the rifle dropped his weapon as he fell forward and sprawled in a motionless heap on the ground. The wagon horses had been going at a gallop and Vinson had ducked down so that he was out of sight.

"Don't try a trick like that again!" shouted Arnold, turning in the seat. He fired deliberately and a bullet plowed into the wagon bed close to where Vinson was bounding about. "Next time I'll shoot to kill!"

"All right, all right!" yelped Vinson. "I'll do jest like yuh say."

They were close to the bunkhouse now. Men appeared from the trees, but they did not fire as Lem Vinson raised his head so that he could peer over the side of the wagon and began shouting.

"Don't shoot, boys! Don't shoot! This is Vinson! He'll gun me if yuh start throwin' lead this way!"

There were angry shouts from the men as the wagon rumbled past, but they obeyed their boss' orders. Arnold brought the team to a halt close to the bunkhouse door. He leaped down from the driver's seat.

"Now's yore chance, men!" shouted Vinson. "Git him!"

A blast of gunfire was the answer from the Bar V crew, but Arnold had ducked out of range on the opposite side of the wagon. Vinson had not been so lucky—and a carelessly aimed bullet creased his scalp and knocked him unconscious.

Arnold grabbed the unconscious man and ran for the door of the bunkhouse. It swung open and closed again quickly as he dashed inside.

"Well, yuh got Vinson," said Parker. "Now what? Gonna be daylight in a little while—and we ain't got much chance of fightin' 'em off when they kin see in through them broken windows."

"We'll worry about that when it happens," Arnold said grimly. "How's the boss?"

"Better'n we thought," Martin declared as he joined the other two men. "The bullet caught him high up in the shoulder—bled a heap but I reckon it ain't fatal."

"That's the best news I've heard in a month of Sundays!" Arnold grinned delightedly.

"Who's that makin' all them funny noises?" demanded a weak voice from the floor.

"It's me, Boss," Arnold told his weak-voiced boss. "I brung yuh a visitor."

"Who?" asked Jefferies.

"Lem Vinson!"

"Vinson!" Jefferies struggled to sit up. "Somebody gimme a gun! I'll take care of that old buzzard my own self."

"Don't git excited, Boss," Arnold soothed. "He can't even argue with yuh now. A bullet creased him and knocked him out."

The red glow that had been spreading across the eastern sky, gave way suddenly to bright sunlight as morning arrived. Arnold glanced about him. Jim Parker, lean and sardonic, with the bullet scar on his cheek standing out starkly, was standing by one of the open windows, still on guard. Martin, short and stocky, with mild blue eyes and a babylike stare was still watching out of the rear window.

Vinson and Jefferies were lying on the floor of the cabin not far from each other. The owner of the Bar V was still unconscious, but suddenly he began to mumble and finally he opened his eyes.

"Where am I?" he muttered.

"Reckon yuh'll figger yuh can't be in Heaven cause I'm here," growled Jefferies. "But if yuh must know, yuh're in the Circle J bunkhouse."

"I was afraid of that." Vinson sat up weakly. "Jest my luck to get knocked out by a bullet and wake up in a den of rattlesnakes." There was a red streak showing through his thick grey hair, and he frowned heavily as he gazed about him. He looked at Jefferies and shook his head. "Funny, yuh and me used to be the best of friends—now all we think about is killin' each other."

"YOU started it when yuh fenced off the lower end of the valley so my stock couldn't git to water," snapped Jefferies. He tried to sit up, but was still too weak, so remained where he was on the floor.

"Mebbe that was a mistake," Vinson admitted, though it was a bit grudgingly. "But yuh didn't come to me like a man and tell me so. Not you! Yuh jest started yore riders cuttin' fence."

"And then yore outfit started killin' off my men!" flared Jefferies.

"Wait a minute, both of yuh!" Lee Arnold stepped forward. "We don't know which side started the killin' that day. Mebbe some of our outfit got a mite excited and went for their guns—and the Bar V rannies beat 'em to the draw. There ain't no way of tellin'. But yuh both been wrong—tryin' to wipe each other out, jest 'cause yuh're a couple of hard-headed old fools."

"I reckon he's right," said Vinson with a smile as he stumbled toward the door. "I'm calling off my men right here and now. This range war is over, Jefferies."

"Suits me," said Jefferies, laconically. "I shore been craving a free range and my old friend."

"Shut up, yuh old buzzard," growled Vinson but there was no anger in the growls. "Good thing yuh ain't hurt bad enough to have that foreman of yours give yuh a ride in a wagon. I tried it, and that boy shore kin drive and talk lead lingo at the same time!"

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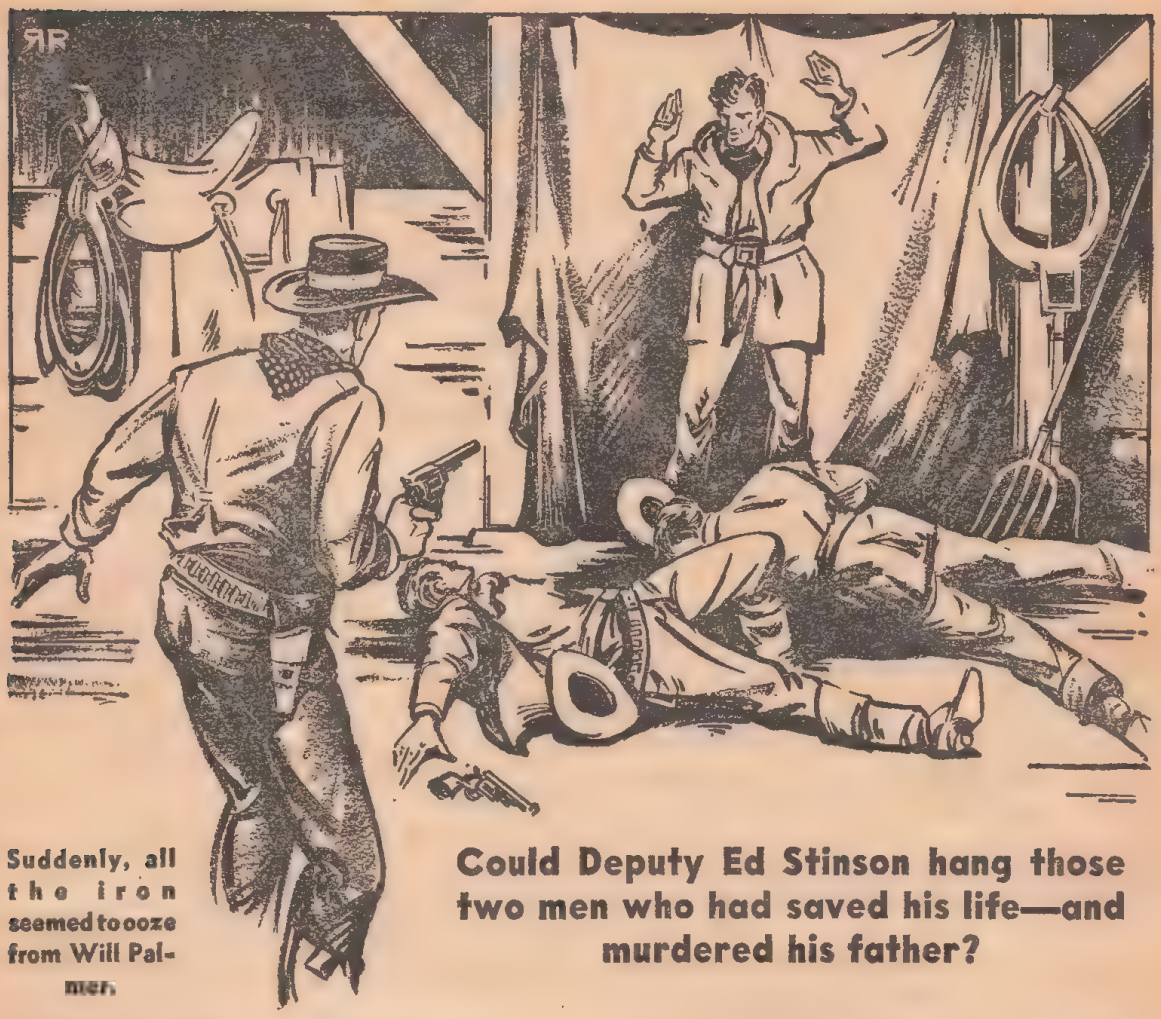


Suddenly, all the iron seemed to ooze from Will Palmer.

Could Deputy Ed Stinson hang those two men who had saved his life—and murdered his father?

THE gnarled scrub sage and greasewood were permanently bent from the eternal wind that swept out of Ten Mile Pass. It beat against the unpainted walls of the little town on the flat, then whirled across the alkali desert. It carried thin, dry and flinty snow that was worming under the door and around the rattling windows of the sheriff's office.

Deputy Sheriff Ed Stinson, stoking the hot blast with aromatic cedar, congratulated himself on the lack of business that allowed him to be inside. But he didn't knock on wood; and he was no more than nudging the stove door shut when boots thumped across the wooden porch and three men entered amid whirling snow and a blistering wind.

"Hello," he said, hoping they'd just come to get warm.

The three regarded him silently while they turned down sheepskin collars, pulled off gloves, stomped numbed feet. With hands spread wide and near the stove, they kept looking at him.

"He looks like his old man," the biggest one finally observed.

"A lot," the stocky one admitted.

The third one, lank and lean, said nothing, but nodded.

"I'm Tobe," the heaviest one explained. "He's Nick, an' he's Vance. And the last name is Berringer. We knowed your dad up Montana way, years ago, when he was sheriff. Thought a heap of your old man, 'fore the Palmer boys kilt him."

"Glad to know you," greeted Stinson.

Big Tobe said, "We've found out where the Palmer boys is at."

Ed Stinson looked from one to another of the Berringer brothers. They were much alike but different too. Tobe was massive. Nick was as tall but lean as dry rawhide; Vince was squat and pudgy. They had olive faces, black hair, and liquid brown eyes contrasting with tight mouths.

"The Palmer boys?" Ed Stinson's voice had an edge. He'd tailed his father's killers for years before finally giving up. But always he'd know, somehow, that he'd meet up with them and settle the score. It had been just a hunch, growing dim with the passing years.

Tobe Berringer nodded. "They've changed a lot, an' growed hair on their faces. But I knowed Will Palmer the minute I clapped eyes on him last week in Carson City. I follered him to his hotel, found out the name he's usin' now and where he registered from. And here we are."

"Who?" asked the deputy. "I'll leave a note for the sheriff where I've gone to. He's gone home to dinner."

"Not so fast, Stinson," drawled Tobe. He opened his sheepskin coat, exposing a low-hung gun, and put his hands on hips. "We want an understanding, first."

The deputy got out a stub pencil, and waited.

"You never did know the Palmer boys," the big man continued. "By sight, that is. You was a kid, livin' off with your uncle to git educated. So you never knew the Palmer boys. But I did."

The deputy still waited.

Pudgy Vance Berringer blurted: "We want the reward."

Then Vance shut up at a glance from his bigger brother. Tobe turned an olive face to the deputy and smiled with thin lips.

"You see how it is, Stinson."

"You can have the reward," the deputy said, unable to keep distaste out of his voice.

"We'll take it in writin'," insinuated Tobe. "No use beatin' about the bush. However you might feel right now, a man might change his mind after he'd thought about a thousand dollars—five hundred apiece on the heads of the Palmer boys. The reward is still good. We looked it up."

"Then why don't you bring them in yourselves?" Ed demanded. "There wouldn't be any question, then."

Tobe's heavy shoulders shrugged. "We figured you'd like the job. Anyhow, we might need another gun. Will Palmer makes a strikin' rattler look like cold molasses when he throws out his hardware."

Stinson wrote out the agreement, gave it to Tobe, and asked again: "Who?"

"The Palmer boys now go by the name of Marcum."

The deputy dropped his stub pencil, stooped slowly to pick it up. "Marcum? You sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. Will an' Leo Marcum. That pair are the Palmer boys."

IF IT hadn't been for the years of bitterness, Ed Stinson wouldn't have been able to ride into the blizzard after Will and Leo Marcum —Will and Leo Palmer, according to Tobe. Neighbors, good friends. He'd traded work with them in putting up hay, stretching fence, shagging down winter wood from the canyon. They did chores for him when he was away on law business, profanely refusing payment. He'd fished with them, gone on pack trips after deer, bunked and ate with them. If it hadn't been for

them coming over one night last year when he ate a bad can of salmon, he might not be alive now. Will had killed a good horse getting a doctor while Leo stayed at the cabin and fed the deputy luke-warm mustard water to wash out his stomach.

But—Ed Stinson pulled his coat collar tighter against the driven snow—they were the Palmer boys.

The three Berringer brothers rode with hats pulled low, faces sunk in the big sheepskin collars of their coats. The road wound up towards Ten Mile Pass, through low hills spotted with runt sage and greasewood, some topped with weather twisted juniper. Stinson took the right fork a mile or so out of town, and another hour's riding brought them in view of the two little ranches on the plateau at the mouth of a small canyon. His place was on the right, the Marcum's—Palmer's—outfit a quarter mile to the left.

Will came out of the shack, raising an arm in greeting, as the four snow-caked men rode in. "No day to be out in!" he called above the whipping wind. "Light off an' thaw yourselves out!"

Ed Stinson followed him in. The three Berringers trailed behind, keeping faces hidden behind big sheep collars and low-pulled sombrero rims. Will and Leo were fussy as old maids about keeping up their cabin. The inside was painted white with green trim. Neat cupboards held dishes, utensils, provisions. Snow from the newcomers' feet tracked a spotless floor.

The deputy asked, "Where's Leo?"

"Leo? He'll show up soon," Will said. He was a tall man with a sandy beard and eyes the color of much-washed Levis.

"Will, is your name Palmer?" Stinson asked bluntly.

Will swung his blue eyes from the deputy to the other three men. Tobe Berringer had opened his coat and had a big fist on the handle of his low-hung six-gun. The other two Berringers had drawn their weapons. To Ed Stinson, it still seemed like a breach of friendship—for him to be doing this to tried and true friends.

"Make a wiggle an' you're a dead man," rumbled big Tobe.

"I ain't seen you three for quite a spell," Will said to them. Then to the deputy: "Yes, Ed. I'm Will Palmer."

"I'll have to take you in, Will," said the deputy. He should have been bitter. But somehow he was only sorry for Will.

"But I ain't goin'," Will advised with soft certainty.

"Don't try no tricks!" rumbled Tobe.

Will's lips were tight within the sandy beard. He said flatly: "Tobe, you an' your brothers keep lookin' this way. If you turn around Leo will bore you from back to front. Leo is at the window with a gun. We seen you riding in. There ain't enough coats in the world to cover up you three coyotes so's we couldn't tell you as far as we can look. And we've been watchin' for the three of you, all these years. We knowed the reward on our heads would fetch you, sometime."

Stinson was standing sideways. He shot a glance at the south window. Blond-bearded Leo was standing outside, with the cold round barrel of a revolver pressed against a frosty pane.

"Leo's there," Stinson grunted. At last anger had come. He flared: "Will, it don't matter if you get away this time! I'll get you! I'll get the pair of you if it's the last thing I ever do!"

"Turn around to the wall," came Will's flat order. His bearded face was hard now, hard as Stinson had ever seen it. The blue eyes were the color of glacier ice.

"Take out your guns and drop 'em to the floor. And move slow. . . . All right. Now kick your guns behind you."

Boots scraped. Guns slithered across the scrub-bleached floor. Will

piled them on the table, went to one of the green-trimmed cupboards and got out his own revolver and harness, buckled it around bony hips. The holster was old, cut deep around the gun action, worn slick and shiny. Turning from the wall, Ed Stinson eyed the distance to the revolvers lying on the table. About eight feet. Will was fussing with the buckle of his cartridge belt. The deputy tensed, waiting until Leo should move from the window.

"All right, Leo," Will called, still watching his belt buckle, fussing with it.

Leo's blond-bearded face outside moved sideways from vision. His boots thumped on the little porch.

Muscles tensed, Ed Stinson relaxed as Will drew his gun. Without hurry, with a smooth coordination so fast it defied analysis, Will brought out his revolver, and then Ed saw the blue ice of the eyes on him, and relaxed. It would be suicide, plain suicide, trying to jump for one of the weapons on the table. He had seen a few gunslingers in his time, had heard of others, but he hadn't imagined human muscles could move with the smooth speed that Will Palmer displayed in getting his Colt from leather.

"I told you he was fast," big Tobe rumbled in the deputy's ear. Leo entered the door.

"And faster than I used to be," admitted Will from bearded lips, thin against his teeth. "Me and Leo have practiced an hour a day, regular, drawin' against each other. We knowed you Berringer skunks would show up, and we kept ready for you. We knowed you'd be the ones to find us, because maybe you'd be afraid until we was dead. And we got ready. We moved here close to Ed Stinson, so's when you did come you'd bring old Jack Stinson's boy along with you to get us. So we got ready to finish up what you started in that cabin up in the hills outside Butte."

"Wh-what you goin' to do?" stuttered pudgy Vance Berringer, stark fear in his voice.

Will ignored the question. Leo took the revolvers from the table and went out, as if by some prearranged plan. Will put a little oil on a rag, carefully wiped his .44 Peacemaker, polished it with a dry cloth, tentatively drew the gun a few times with that liquid motion, shifting the harness on bony hips ever so slightly. Finally he tied the holster thong around a lean leg, and:

"All right," he said. "File out to the rear of the granary. I don't want to muss up the clean floor in here."

AS HE crossed the frozen yard, leaning against the whipping wind, Ed Stinson's muscles fought one against another. Will and Leo Marcum—Palmer—had moved alongside, had made friends with him, had waited all these years, waiting out their plan. They'd known the safest place to hide is close to a man. Now, whatever their plan was, they were going through with it.

Snow was drifting against the unglazed, granary window, and it seemed incredibly cold in the plum-shadowed interior. An old saddle was hanging by a wire from a rafter. Half the place was used as a store-room. Bits of leather, cans, hammer and saw, shoemaker's last, other odds and ends were stacked neatly by the walls or hung from nails. And, with that precise way the bearded brothers had, Leo had hung the four revolvers along the wall in a row on nails by the trigger guards. The rear half of the place was partitioned off with a low board railing and loose, flapping burlap nailed to the boards and joists.

"Line up along there," Will ordered, nodding at the burlap-and-board partition. Then he said to Leo: "You hike out of it. You know what to do."

Leo went out. The wind swung open the door which banged against

the outside wall. Presently there sounded the muffled *clu-clug* of hoofs on the thin snow. The sound died away.

"He's fixin' the getaway, is he?" big Tobe rumbled a bit thinly through set lips, trying to bolster his courage with speech.

"We've had this all figured for quite a spell," admitted Will. He fussed a bit with his tied holster, getting it in the exact position he wanted, then brought Durham from a shirt pocket and rolled a tight round cigarette with steady fingers. He seemed in no hurry, and that gave a tiny gleam of hope to Ed Stinson. Sheriff Chet Walraven, returning from dinner, would find the note in the office. . . .

Will took one of the revolvers from the row hanging on the wall, saying, "I'm givin' each of you a chance to draw, with your own guns. I wouldn't kill a coyote without givin' it a chance. This is your gun, Tobe. I'll slide it along the floor. You turn your back, pick it up and leather it, then turn around again with your hands away from it."

Stinson watched. Wind from the unglazed window and open door flapped the loose burlap partition against his shoulders and hat brim, sending electric shivers down his spine. His hands were cold and stiff. The revolver clattered along the floor. Burly Tobe Berringer turned his back, picked it up, holstered it, turned to face Will again.

Fear was in Tobe's hulking figure. He backed against the wooden bottom of the partition for support, heavy shoulders deeply denting the flapping burlap. His hands were wide-spread on his big belly, quivering it as they shook.

"I ain't got a chance, drawin' again' you, Will," he croaked.

"Neither did sheriff Jack Stinson have a chance," Will said. His voice was as freezing and impersonal as the bitter wind coming through the window opening.

"You can't prove nothing!" Tobe cried desperately.

"No, I can't prove nothing," admitted Will. "That's why we'll finish up this way. Go for your gun, Tobe."

Will stood there calmly, almost lazily, waiting, watching with a shade of amusement while the fat hulk of Tobe Berringer trembled. The wind screamed like a lost soul and then Tobe echoed the shriek as tight nerves gave way. His big right hand wiped around and down along his shirt as he snatched for his weapon. He was fast, but his draw was pitifully clumsy to the smooth motion of the sandy-bearded man. His weapon was halfway in leather when Will's .44 coughed a red-orange tongue into the shadows of the granary. By some reflex Tobe kept dragging out the weapon even as he went down. Then the heavy revolver thumped hollowly on the wooden floor and the big man sprawled beside it.

Will holstered his weapon and with what seemed an inhuman steadiness reached for another of those weapons hanging on the nails. His face and beard looked like some granite cliff adorned by scrub brush.

"Here, Nick," he said, sliding the gun along the floor.

The third Berringer, pudgy Vance, was panting hard beside Ed Stinson, breath wheezing in his throat. Nick backed to the gun, holstered it, turned, easing against the partition. He wasn't shaking. His rawhide frame was steady.

"Finish it out," he growled. He had courage, anyway.

"Will," spoke up Stinson, fighting his voice level, "It wouldn't matter to a man like you, but this is cold-blooded murder. These men can't draw against you. The chance you're giving them is nothing at all."

Nick Berringer turned eyes in his bony face, saying: "The Palmer boys

don't give chances. An' you'll go down also, Ed Stinson. The Palmers wouldn't leave a witness alive."

Against the open door at his back, Will made an implacable silhouette. Outside, behind him, were the fences and sheds of the little ranch, with scrub sage beyond bending against the winter wind.

"We won't palaver," he said. "There's no use—"

ACTION came in the middle of speech as lean Nick Berringer took the opportunity to make the grab, trying to catch Will off guard. But Nick was slower than Tobe had been. The explosion of Will's gun beat upon ear drums and Nick sagged into the burlap partition, ripping it from some of the holding nails on the joists above, then half turned on the lip of the board railing and fell heavily over Tobe.

"There's no use palaverin'," Will said, finishing his speech with inhuman calmness. "We got the name of killers, an' so we're livin' up to it."

"What do you mean, Will?" asked the deputy tightly.

Will shrugged. "No use talkin'; we just never did kill your dad, is all. D'you want to listen to a story, before the end?"

"I'm listenin', Will."

"Well, me an' Leo was accused of workin' some brands—"

"I know that part of it. My dad went up to a cabin in the hills to fetch you in, and you killed him."

"So the law says, Ed. Except we didn't kill him. Can't prove it, but we didn't. The Berringers knowed we was hidin' out in that cabin. They was fetchin' us food. When the sheriff —your dad—come up for us, we had a chance to shoot him, but we didn't, because we wasn't killers. He told us that the Berringers had tipped him off as to where we was at. Said he'd suspected them a long whiles of rustling, and figured they'd framed us to throw suspicion from theirselves. He said we'd better go in to jail with him, so's the Berringers wouldn't suspect nothing, an' that meanwhile he'd try to get the goods on them before our case come up for trial. Me and Leo agreed.

"Then a rifle shot come through the window, gettin' your dad straight through the heart. Me and Leo run out, but never found nothing but some tracks. We knowed it was the Berringers, but couldn't prove it.

"So we growed beards, and after you'd stopped chasing all over lookin' for us, Ed, we moved in close to you when you settled down. We knowed the reward on our heads would bring the Berringers, someday, and we could square up."

Ed Stinson looked at the two limp figures on the floor, at pudgy Vance's fear-mottled face, then to Will's granite figure.

"You still can't prove it, Will," he said. "And you've killed two men here. You'll hang for that."

Will shrugged. "I told you there wasn't no use talkin'."

He took Vance's revolver from its nail and slid it along the floor.

"I'll talk!" pudgy Vance cried suddenly, his voice gurgling from a full throat. "I'll say anything you want me to!"

"A lone confession ain't no good," Will advised wearily, nodding at the two limp figures. "Not to the law, it ain't."

"I'll say anything you want!" gurgled Vance, and fear was so great it made the pudgy man disgusting rather than pitiful. Saliva drooled down his olive chin. The trap mouth now was loose and flabby. "Yes, we killed sheriff Jack Stinson because he knew too much about us. We tipped him off where you an' Leo was hidin' out, us figurin' you'd kill him when he come for you. But you didn't. I was by the window when I heard the sheriff talkin' to you about

gettin' us. I run back to where Nick an' Tobe was at with the horses, an' told 'em, and Tobe shot through the window with a rifle."

"Uncorroborated confession ain't no good," droned Will implacably, "to the law."

"But I got proof!" Pudgy Vance was squealing now. "A sheepherder seen Tobe shoot that rifle. He come to us later, tryin' to git money to keep his mouth shut. Tobe tried to kill him, but he got away. We sent a message to his family about what would happen if he ever talked. He never did.

"And," finished Vance, a desperate cunning distorting his flabby features, "I'll tell you the name of that sheepherder, if you'll let me loose."

"I don't bargain with a Berringer," Will said. "Turn your back and pick up your gun."

Vance obeyed.

Stinson said, "Will, don't you be a fool. You're cutting off your last chance to clear yourself."

"Draw, Vance," said Will. There was no talking to this man of granite. Perhaps the years had filled his heart too full of hate for him to think of himself.

"Vance, draw."

Again the two motions, one clumsy, the other a streak of incredible speed. Vance stood a full three seconds with his weight supported by the burlap top of the partition before he melted down to the floor.

Ed Stinson looked at the remaining revolver hanging by the nail on the wall. His gun. Will took the weapon, slid it along the floor.

"Here's your gun, Ed."

"And you won't leave a witness alive."

But all the iron seemed out of Will Palmer, suddenly.

"No, Ed. Pick it up. My play is finished. I wanted you to know the truth, Ed. That's all."

Ed Stinson picked up the gun, slid it in the smooth holster. Everything was so hopeless. Will had closed the lips that would have freed him. The deputy wiped a hand across his eyes, and then was looking at two men. A newcomer had come through the open door, a chunky, bull-necked fellow with a bandana coming from below his hatband, over his ears, and tied under his chin.

It was Sheriff Chet Walraven. A few moments ago, the appearance of the sheriff would have seemed salvation. Now it was disaster.

SHERIFF Chet Walraven had a naked gun in his hand. "Who's shootin'?" he demanded, then stiffened at sight of the three limp figures in the shadows, and asked in a low voice:

"Who done that?"

"I did," said Will Palmer. "I've just surrendered to your deputy."

The sheriff jerked Will's revolver from its holster, stuck it in his belt.

"Seen your note in the office an' come out pronto," Walraven advised Ed Stinson. "So Will an' Leo are the Palmer boys, huh? Where's Leo? . . . Gone? . . . Keep your gun on Will while I see if I kin do anything for these poor devils."

The sheriff crossed to the three figures, kneeled.

"Wait a minute, Chet," Ed Stinson said. His voice was a bit high. He pointed his revolver at the sheriff.

Walraven twisted his thick neck, blinked at the round end of his deputy's weapon.

"You gone plumb loco, Ed?"

"Maybe I have, Chet. But I'm givin' Will a chance to break away. Get going, Will. Clear out of here."

There was a long moment of silence, broken by a groan from one of the Berringers on the floor. Will remained motionless.

"Will, get a move on you."

"The devil you say!" flared the chunky sheriff, springing erect. "Put that gun down, Ed Stinson!"

"I can't prove nothing, but I know Will and Leo didn't kill my dad. I know that, and so I'm givin' Will a chance to make the break. You can take it or leave it, Chet."

"That'll make you an outlaw, Ed."

"Can't help that. Keep your hands still, Chet."

Will said, smiling just a little in a soft sort of way: "Ed, I've wanted to hear you say it, that you believed we was innocent."

"I reckon I'll ride with you, Will," Ed Stinson decided. "You take Chet's hardware, and we'll tie him up. We'll meet Leo and be on our way."

Will shook his bearded face. "No, Ed. I'm stayin' here."

"You can't face murder for killin' these three skunks."

"Ain't murder," agreed Will, and Ed Stinson's hair raised on the back of his neck at the sound of a low chuckle from the bearded one. What sort of man could laugh after mowing three men down? Will's hate of the Berringers, Ed decided, must have been consuming.

"I figured Vance would talk," Will was saying, "if I put on the pressure. He was the weak link. And if he talked once, he will again. Especially since you heard him."

"Then they ain't dead? You shot only to stop 'em?"

Will's sandy beard fanned out as his grin widened. "I got blanks in my gun," he explained. "And Leo put blanks in the Berringers' guns when he brung 'em out here to the granary. We figured this all out years ago, Ed. We figured to stake it all on a bluff when the Berringers showed. And we moved close to you, in hope they'd bring you and you could hear when I put the pressure on Vance. And—"

Leo's voice came from the other end of the granary, from behind the burlap partition:

"It's plenty dark back in here, an' I can see through this burlap, with the window an' door open there in front. I can see through a little, but you can't see me in the dark. I'll be around in a minute."

Presently he came in the door, his blonde beard twitching as he chuckled. He was holding a pick handle.

"Lucky it was windy today. Wind flopped that burlap so's nobody caught on when I would give 'em a love-tap on the head as they went for their guns."

"Now—dog-gone it!" bawled Sheriff Walraven. "Start from the first!"

WHEN the party was halfway to town—the three Berringers, now conscious, coming with feet lashed under the bellies of led horses—the sheriff finally got the story straight, and began to laugh.

"Ye-ah, they'll talk again!" he rumbled. "Or I'll know the reason why!" Then he asked: "But what if the Berringers hadn't brought along a witness to hear?"

Will shrugged. "You have to take a chance in every game. But it wasn't much of a chance. I figured a crew who would shoot a man through the window wouldn't have guts enough to come get us without help. An' they'd naturally bring Ed, knowin' he was good with a gun and would want to kill us when he knew who we was."

"But," asked Ed Stinson, "why'd you go ahead with the play on Vance after you'd got what you wanted out of him?"

"Well," Will explained, "I guess I was just a little bit sore at the Berringers, is why I finished out the play with Vance. Might've been small of me, but after what they done to us, it sort of done my heart good to put the fear of the Devil in Vance. Dunno, Ed. I'd hate to live the kind of life that'd make me so much afraid of dyin'."

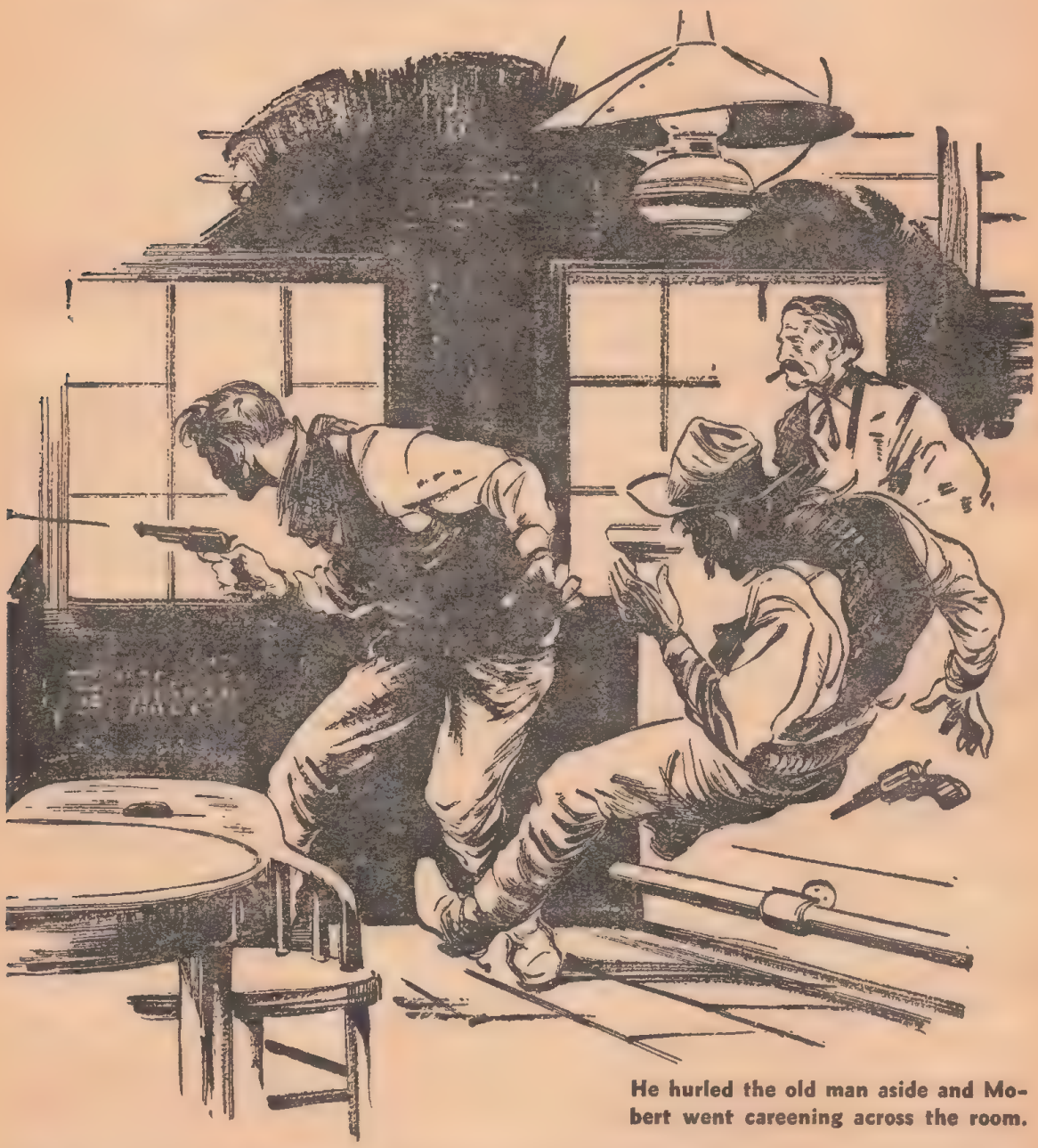
"I guess you won't have to worry," said Ed Stinson.

THE END

No matter how hard Placid Parker tried to dodge trouble he always walked into a

GUNSMOKE SETUP

By WILLIAM FARGO



He hurled the old man aside and Mobert went careening across the room.

"PLACID" PARKER was not looking for trouble when he strode into the Powder Bar saloon. He didn't need to look for it—he knew that it was waiting for him. He knew that he faced a killer's guns, tonight, but he kept right on a-going. Bash Kallan had to be faced, sooner or later and, as Parker figured, it might just as well be sooner.

A weighty silence squeezed down upon the Saturday night crowd when Parker pushed through the batwings. Cowhands looked at each other with expressions of discomfort, forgot all about their drinks, and edged away. Quickly, a lane was opened up, extending from black-visaged, morose Bash Kallan at the far end of the bar to Placid Parker at the door.

A bald, pink-faced little glass-wiper stooped quickly behind the mahogany, as if to retrieve a dropped towel—and did not reappear.

It was evident that Kallan had been slinging kill-talk, here in the saloon. And, having swung a wide lip, would have to back his play or be branded forever as yellow. Parker could see that the hulking, slouchy outlaw was carrying plenty of firewater under his belt. Enough to make him even more ugly tempered than usual. Enough to make him downright reckless, in a tight spot. But not enough to hamper the speed of his greased-lightning draw, nor to upset the accuracy of his aim.

Parker advanced down the bar.

"Heard talk, around town," he informed Kallan, mildly. "Folks told me you hankered to see me, was waitin' for me here."

Kallan scowled, suspiciously. This was not quite the setup he had been expecting. He had looked for a white-faced, tense, scared young cowman. But Parker was drawling his words, was moving his lank body with a carefree swing. He seemed plumb unworried—which, for a gent in his position, was peculiar . . .

But there were two things which would have disturbed Kallan, had he noticed them. One was the business-like, low-hung position of Placid's walnut-handled irons. The other was the talonlike crook of his poised fingers, close above the guns.

Kallan didn't see those things. He drew a gusty breath through his flattened-out nose, edged away from the bar so he would have ample room for his draw. "Yeah!" he rasped. "You heard straight, all right! I been sayin' this town ain't big enough for the two of us. I'm still sayin' it. I've stood plenty of abuse, from you Parkers. First yore old man slings guff my way. Now you started in to ridin' me, accusin' me of rustlin' fall beef. Well me, I'm a-callin yore bluff, yuh yelluh-bellied coyote younker! Le's see yuh draw iron!"

FIGHTING talk, that, but Placid Parker made no move toward those walnut-handled guns which had been his father's. Slowly, smiling, he advanced along the bar.

"You're plumb mistaken, Kallan," he remarked. "Neither my dad nor me ever persecuted anybody. Fact is, a long ways back when he discovered this range an' established the Rollin' L, an' had to gunfight every crook in the country to hold the spread, Dad decided that we Parkers would never let crooks an' human mavericks like yoreself infest this-here range.

"Kallan, you been rustlin'—everybody knows it. An' so, since the sheriff is scared to serve that warrant I swore out against yuh—"

"Make yore play, dammit! Cut the palaverin' an'—" Kallan shouted. The tension was getting the barrel-chested outlaw. Everyone in Powder River knew Placid Parker as an easy going, drawling cuss who never drew an iron in an argument. And yet Placid was the son of Old Man Parker, had probably inherited the gunswift with which his father cleaned out the range, had certainly been taught to sling iron by his father. Bash Kallan would find out about that, in a few seconds.

"Draw!" Kallan rasped. "Else I'll blow yuh loose from yore backbone, regardless!"

Placid Parker lifted his hands, slowly. "That," he pointed out, "would be murder—an' in case of

same, these gents here would be obliged to hang you, pronto if not quicker. Yuh see, I ain't drawin'."

Kallan's dour mouth sagged slowly. "Yo're backin' down?" he yelled. "I shore had yuh ticketed right an' proper, yuh yelluh—"

"Not backin' down—not a damn' inch," Placid corrected, with an edge in his voice. "You know as well as anybody that when my dad died, from the effects of his old gunshot wounds, he made me swear that I'd never lift a gun in anger, never use gunsmoke to settle anything. He was of the opinion that a gun is more dangerous, in the long run, to the man behind it than to the man facin' it. I suspect he was dead right—an' I aim to keep my promise to him, regardless. Now, you an' me are gonna tangle proper, but I suggest we shed the hardware, use our fists—"

Kallan, it was plain, disliked and distrusted that idea. Placid Parker had lived much in the open—his rangy frame was powerful, his eyes were clear. And Kallan's strength had been burned away by too much liquor. Kallan scowled, shifted his weight.

And still Placid kept advancing down the bar.

But as he did so, the heir to the Rolling L turned his head slightly, spoke to a wizened yet peppery old-timer who crouched at the edge of the crowd watching the showdown.

"Dal," Placid said. "You was a friend to my dad. I'm askin' you to come over here, take charge of these irons. Mine, an' Kallan's."

Kallan barked a warning to Dal Mobert. Yet the oldster came quickly forward.

"Yuh young fool!" he snapped to Placid, as he pulled the walnut-handled guns from their holsters. "Yuh can't trust that Kallan gent a blasted inch. An' now you're without guns, he's plumb likely to—"

"I know," Placid said. "Get his guns."

Mobert's faded, yet keen old eyes drilled questioningly into Placid's face. The oldster shrugged faintly then, with one of Parker's guns in each of his hands, he turned to Kallan.

But as Mobert did so, and while the move was shielded from Kallan's bitter, wary eyes by the old-timer's frail body, Placid Parker reached out and lifted Mobert's own gun gently from its alkali-stained holster. Nobody in the crowd noticed the move, or at least no one spoke up. All eyes were upon Kallan. It was the rustler's play, now . . .

SLOWLY, with the stiff poise of a fighting rooster, old Dal advanced upon the glowering rustler.

Kallan's heavy frame jerked into motion—he edged back, into a position from which he could drop quickly behind the end of the counter. The rustler was downright worried, and was looking for an out.

"Git back, yuh old crowbait runt!" Kallan yelled at Mobert. "This ain't yore fight. Git back, an' drop them guns, afore I blow yuh plumb to—"

"Hand over them smokepipes!" Mobert commanded.

Kallan crouched. His little eyes blazed. But then a new and crafty expression came into those eyes.

"Awright!" Kallan snapped. "I'll hand yuh these guns, yuh old polecat—*hot end first!*"

Kallan's body melted into a blur of lightning motion as he made his draw, lined smokepipes on the oldster, and thumbed hammers.

Placid Parker, who had watched all this with apparently lazy and disinterested eyes, lunged into motion just an instant before Kallan did. Parker leaped forward.

Old Dal Mobert was swinging the Parker six-guns, but he was unused to the heft and balance of the weapons, and couldn't quite make up his mind whether to drop these

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walnut-handled guns and go for his own more familiar weapon, or to face out the play with the irons which were in hand. And this moment of indecision was stacking up to cost Mobert plenty high.

But Placid Parker caught the frail old man, hurled him aside. Mobert went careening across the room, smashed into the crowd.

And Kallan, all keyed-up for the kill, swung to follow Mobert with astounded eyes. Kallan was a gent whose wits moved slowly and once he got his sights set on one thing he could not change quickly to another. He had figured, undoubtedly, first to gun down the old-timer, then to finish the supposedly unarmed and helpless Parker. But now Kallan couldn't throw down on Mobert without killing two or three of the crowd. Even that fact would not have stopped him for long, but—

"Kallan!" Parker yelled.

The rustler wheeled. His nostrils flared when he saw Mobert's gun in Placid Parker's hand. With a wild yell, the rustler started firing.

Placid Parker did exactly nothing. He just stood there smiling, holding back the hammer of Mobert's gun, and let Kallan fire the first shot.

The slug nicked Parker's left leg—he felt the slight sting and pull of it. But that didn't matter. Kallan was yelling, peering through the smoke of his own gun, firing again. Parker took careful aim, and let go of the hammer.

Mobert's ancient smokepipe bucked savagely. As if in sort of an echo to that movement, Bash Kallan lurched backward, groaned.

But Kallan was game, in his way. Any ordinary man would have been finished, drilled dead-center as Kallan was. But Kallan was like a grizzly, in more ways than mere looks. He kept on his feet, bellowing defiance and pain and rage, slamming lead through the hot, pungent gunsmoke.

Placid Parker's smile was still gentle, yet somehow there was a steely glint in his eyes now. Kallan was shooting wild. Parker fired another shot—and struck dead center.

The big rustler suddenly collapsed, tried vainly to stagger to the protection of the end of the bar, failed, and fell heavily to the sawdust.

A sigh went through the Powder Bar. Kallan, whom every cowman in the country feared and hated, was through.

OLD Dal Mobert practically dragged Placid Parker away from the jubilant throng. "Younker," piped the old-timer, "I sure admire to state that I'm plumb proud of yuh! For a minute, there, you had me worried, but—"

"I'm sorry I had to use you so rough, Dal, but you see, I had to play straight with my dad. Means a mighty lot to me to keep that promise I made him when he died. I knew, when I walked in here, that I was headin' into a gunsmoke setup. Dad didn't want me to settle any argument with gunsmoke—but I reckon he sure won't be feelin' badly about me usin' a smokepipe to save the life of one of his old friends, happen so!"

"Yuh knowed blamed well Kallan'd try somethin' dirty, an' yuh was one jump ahead of him!" Mobert exclaimed. "Why yuh young—"

"I hope you ain't riled because I sort of put you in danger," Placid Parker said, hastily.

"Riled? Hell, no! If you hadn't called me, I'd of up an' horned into the setup anyhow, in another second."

"You was really in no danger—I was coverin' Kallan every second, with your gun," Placid said.

Mobert banged a fist on the bar. "Hell, younker, I'm plumb proud of yuh! You hornswoggled Kallan, proper, an' didn't fall down on yore promise to yore old man. Drinks are on me!"

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It doesn't pay to 'Gulch a man, even though you are a

SLICK HOMBRE

By JOHN BENNET

He fell slowly forward until his head rested on his left forearm.

BEN GAGE had decided to kill Sam Cressley.

The two were equal partners in a big cow outfit on the upper Rio Santos, a few miles from a town named Burnt Pine. They were middle-aged and bachelors, parsimonious and irascible; they'd never been able to get along with any of their rancher neighbors. Gage was built heavily, bald and florid. Cressley was tall and angular, hook-nosed, and had mouse-colored hair. Gage was fond of strong, black cigars. Cressley hated cigars of any kind. It was in this small thing that their mutual dislike had been born.

But back of the murder plan there was a more important fact. In better days, each had made the other beneficiary in his will. Fourteen thousand dollars, half the estimated value of the Sundown Ranch, Ben Gage kept telling himself, would be excellent pay for a few minutes of action and acting. He had studied every angle of the plan. It was simple. It was infallible.

That is, if he kept his head and his nerve. And he'd do that. Oh, he'd do that, all right. He'd be one slick hombre.

He chose the best possible time—a Saturday afternoon when all the

crew except for a few cowboys on the far-flung north range, and both cooks, had gone to town for a hi-yu night with their pay money. Cressley was in the office just off the ranch-house living room, working with his ledgers. Only one shot would be necessary, for Gage was a first-class marksman. One shot through a window. . . .

It was cool, that February afternoon. The bald and florid Ben Gage sat before a fire of mesquite roots in the living room and watched the hands of the mantel clock as they moved—stealthily, it occurred to him—toward four. Except for the clock's ticking, and the occasional faint scratching of Sam Cressley's pen, all was silent. Gage reached for a cigar box on a nearby table, did it absent-mindedly. But there wasn't time for a smoke.

Four gonglike peals out of the vitals of the clock covered his soft footfalls when he arose and hurried out of the ranch-house. Two minutes more, and he was behind a clump of blooming retamas just outside one of the office windows. Cressley was a fresh-air fiend. The lower sash was up. There would be no glass to deflect the bullet.

Ben Gage drew his silver-mounted .38 Colt, leveled it at Sam Cressley's chest, pressed the trigger.

The man inside flinched at the shock of the bullet. He jerked up in his chair, saw his killer pardner, and smiled a tiny, pale, bitter smile. Then he wilted slowly forward until his mouse-colored head rested on his forearms on the desk.

Gage ran into the house, cleaned the barrel of his gun and put in a fresh cartridge, put the gun on the mantel in plain sight. He looked at his two hands. They were not shaking. He was keeping his head and his nerve. Gage went to an old-fashioned wall telephone instrument and cranked it. Burnt Pine answered promptly.

"Sheriff's office!" he bellowed into the transmitter. "Quick—there's been a killing out here!"

Right away the wire carried to him the drawling voice of Sheriff Luther Henley: "Hello! What—who is it?" His voice sounded loud, strident.

"Ben Gage," hastily said the killer. "Somebody's just shot Sam through a window. See how fast you can get yourself out here, Lute, will you?"

"Be there in half an hour. Sure Sam's dead?"

"Looks like it. But you can send the doctor out if you want to. Say, get a move on you, Lute!"

He heard the click of the other receiver, and he, too, hung up.

NOW would come the supreme test. His acting must be without a flaw. Well, that should be easy enough. He strolled over to the table near the fire, took a fat black cigar from the box, noted in absent-minded fashion that there were four others left. But he did not light the cigar. He held the weed poised between two pudgy fingers and stared off at nothing. Of course, he could act the part. Easiest, simplest thing in the world.

It might be wise to have one look into the office before Sheriff Lute Henley came. Gage hurried in. His partner lay as he had fallen, but under his chest the desk blotter now was wet and red.

"Hell's—fire—" suddenly jerked out Ben Gage.

The dead Cressley's right hand still gripped his pen, the point of which was stuck through a slip of paper carrying a message in ink that was scarcely dry, a slip of paper all stained red along one edge. The message, a barely legible scrawl, was damning. Cressley hadn't died instantly.

Sheriff Henley
It was Ben Gage that shot me am positive no mistake will hide this where you can find it

Samuel Cres

His intention had been to hide the message somewhere in his clothing, no doubt. But the pale hand had failed even before he'd finished signing his name.

"Lucky—" Ben Gage muttered. He took the pen from the stiffening fingers, dropped it, picked up the slip of paper and read the tragic lines again. Then he swore. The old fox! But little good it would do him. This message was going straight into the living room fire.

Gage strode back to the living room, savagely pulled the cigar from his mouth. He looked at the unlighted "rope." He had only four cigars left, and Luther Henley would take at least one of them. Better save this one. Better put it back in the box.

IT seemed a long time before he heard a rattle of hoofs outside. He met the sheriff on the front gallery. Gage was very calm; keeping his head and his nerve; slick.

"The doc's comin'," drawled Luther Henley, "but his hawss is slow, and he won't be here for a few minutes. Now, Ben, tell me anything that you think might help me get a line on the killer. Didn't see him?"

"No," Gage said, "I didn't. I was sitting by the fire, half asleep, when I heard the shot. Took me a minute or so to come awake. Then I hurried into the office room and found Sam, shot. Ran outside and looked everywhere. The sand is all dry and powdery, and won't register any special footprint."

The officer proceeded to look the place over diligently. He could find no clue. The doctor came, pronounced Cressley dead, and rode back townward for the coroner. Ben Gage and the sheriff went to the living room fire and sat down. Gage picked up his cigar-box and proffered it to Henley.

"Smoke, Lute?"

"Thanks, Ben, don't care if I do," the officer said, and took the box and opened it. "Now let's try to reason this thing, Ben. You and Sam both had enemies, lots of 'em, if you don't mind me sayin' so: Is there any particular one o' these that you suspect—er, any particular one—"

Luther Henley broke off and stared into the cigar-box, stared for a full half minute, his eyes going down narrow and hard. Then he rose and produced a pair of manacles, irons that were no harder than his voice:

"You—stick out your wrists for these, you damned killer!"

The other went death-white and slumped in his chair. Using his head and his nerve? Instead of putting the cigar back into the box and throwing the damning message into the fire, Ben Gage had thrown the cigar into the fire and placed the message in the box—and then had blandly given it to the sheriff.

Slick hombre!

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